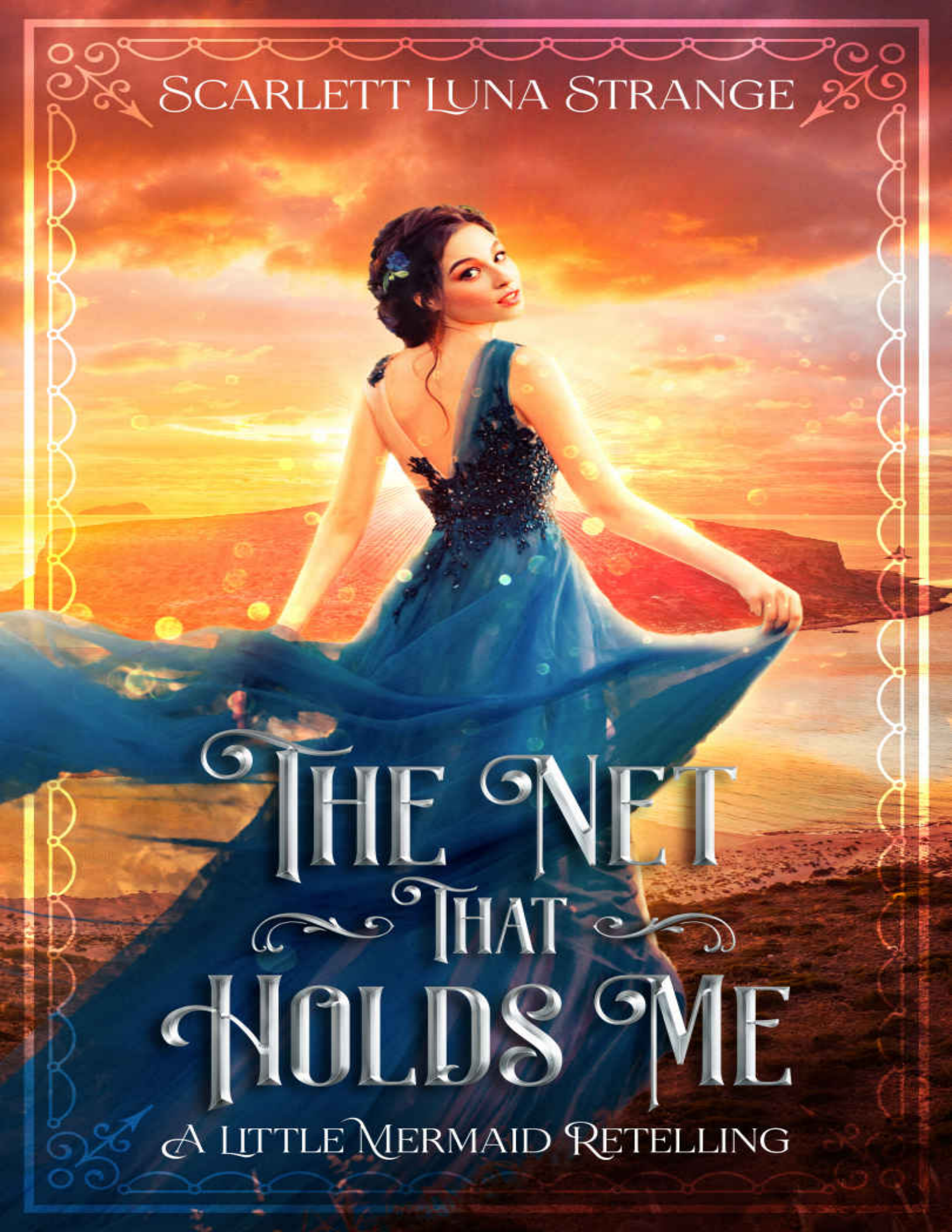
SCARLETT LUNA STRANGE
THE NET THAT HOLDS ME
A LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING

Tales From Sandy Shore

Book One

The Net That Holds Me

Scarlett Luna Strange

Tales From Sandy Shore: The Net That Holds Me

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Books by Scarlett Luna Strange

Tales From Sandy Shore

The Net That Holds Me

Author’s Note

Dearest Reader,

It is with great joy that I communicate to you that this author has chosen to write in British English rather than American English, as I am simply put, not an American.

Thank you!

Prologue

I remember feeling the wind on my warm, wet skin and the way the moonlight reflected on the water that day as I broke the surface. It was a feeling I had felt many times during my trips to the surface.

Every night I swam closer and closer to the shore, despite my father's warnings. A sea king of the ripe old age of seventy-eight, who simply couldn't stand the thought of his baby girl so close to humans and their constant destructive nature.

I didn't blame him. From the stories I had heard, they were quite something. While we had no historic accounts, the tales that were passed down from generation to generation told the truth of how truly terrible a human could be.

I couldn't help it, though. Something called to me; something beckoned me here. Night after night, I made my trip to the surface, yet I hadn't quite placed what it was.

So, as the familiar goosebumps hit of being in the cool air of night, I pondered once more what it could mean for me to experience something on

the shore. To be the first mermaid to move among two-leggers. Tove, the sea witch, had said it could be done, but she would never do it.

“I could never send you to such a slaughter, love. If they knew what you were, that’s surely what would become of you.”

Her familiar words rang in my mind. She would be horrified to know where I came nearly every night. However, in my defense, I heeded her warnings for years until the curiosity in my mind took over.

I listened to the words of my father, my friend, and every ocean creature that had come before mine. I never doubted; I never swayed.

Until one night, I decided to swim right up to the edge of the coast. That was the night that changed my life forever. A night when everything I thought I knew couldn’t exist alongside what I then learned.

CHAPTER ONE

“Sage, come on! We’re late for breakfast. He may be our father, but he’s still the king!” My cozy clam bed vibrated as Naja knocked on it.

I groaned as the seawater rushed into what was once my warm, closed clam. “Naja, you know I hate when you open my clam before I’m ready!”

“Oh, stuff it,” she replied as she pulled on my fins to get up. “Five minutes until breakfast, and you’re still wearing your nightshirt, sleeping away in bed. Up!”

She was gone in a flurry, but sadly, I was unable to find the comfortable position I once had. “Remind me to leave seaweed in her clam before bed,” I mumbled to myself as I pushed up and grabbed my brush from the nightstand next to me.

My natural shell lamp had already turned on, flooding the room with a bright blue light and I knew Naja was right. What she didn’t know was

another late-night trip to the surface had been the culprit for my sleeping in too late.

If I was going to make it on time for breakfast, I needed to hurry. I pulled my auburn hair back and fastened it with a comb adorned with pearls as I made my way to my closet. I was guilty of owning far too many green cropped tops, but I couldn't help it. As much as I tried to avoid them at the market, I always bought one or two. My other option was black tops. I chose a green one adorned with small purple flowers and quickly changed from my nightshirt.

An impatient knock sounded at my door as I rushed to it. It was Naja, of course, coming to make sure I had actually left my bed. "I'm up, I'm up!" I said sharply, and she sent me a scowl.

We swam to the breakfast chamber and entered as the clock struck eight.

"Ah, there are two of my beauties," my father bellowed in delight when he saw us.

My mother glanced up from her breakfast and gave us a quick smile. Her eyes fell on my shirt, and I saw disappointment in her expression. "I must come with you the next time you shop, Sage. Your clothing choices have become rather… repetitive."

I ignored her remark and tried to distract her. "Will Flora be joining us for breakfast this morning?" Our eldest sister, newly married, was by far our favourite. Naja and I tolerated one another well enough, but with Flora around, the three of us got along famously.

"I believe her and Kai already left for the day," my father commented. I stifled my moan as I knew what that meant. Our duties for the day would involve Naja and me getting along and helping our mother prepare for yet another event.

"Now, now, I'll have none of those gripes and complaints," my mother stated. "It's going to be a busy day. Your father and I have decided to split into two parties. Sage will accompany me, and Naja, you'll go with your father. You two have a state dinner to plan. Sage, we'll be serving at the local kitchen… and stopping at the market for appropriate attire on the way home."

So much for ignoring her remark. Now I'd be stuck looking at open-finned dresses for the afternoon. Serving at the local kitchen wasn't a

problem, but shopping with my overly chipper mother was.

Was it too late to trade places with Naja? I looked over at her. She didn't look excited about the arrangements, either.I
n a rare moment of kindness, Naja spoke up. "Oh actually, Mother, I need your assistance with a gown for the dinner. And Sage is so much better at seating arrangements and décor; I'm likely to offend someone for certain!"

Mother considered this with a frown and slowly nodded. "You're right. Your last attempt at a state dinner was…" She leaned forward to pat Naja's arm. "Well, you tried, dear."

Everyone knew it was difficult to meet Mother's expectations, yet we still tried to avoid disappointing her. I quickly jumped in. "What a splendid idea!"

Her eyes lit up at Naja and me agreeing with each other and she was back to beaming in no time. "Very well. Let's finish up our breakfast and we'll be on our way."
Breakfast passed much more quietly once our plans were settled. However, it was hard to ignore the sudden glow in Naja's cheeks.

~

"Are you planning on telling Mother why you're really so eager to head to the local kitchen?"

Naja blushed as she shook her head. "No, and you'd better not! I don't even know if I'll see him. He rushes around constantly. It's like he's always flying off somewhere. I haven't seen him in weeks." She threw herself on her bed dramatically. "Besides, wouldn't you rather be here planning instead of being out there with Mother throwing those weird outfits on you?"

I shuddered and hastily agreed, "We both know she's going to pick something for me while she's out, anyway."

"True. But with me there, I can sway her. Consider it payment on you keeping your mouth shut!"

Our fins crossed each other in agreement and we spoke our sisterly promise. "In fin until death."

CHAPTER TWO

The day passed quickly, which surprised me. It was always a pleasant day whenever I got to deal with diplomacy issues for state dinners.

I left a small shell with a carved fin on my bedroom door, as I always did once I'd prepared for an outing, and began to make my way out of the palace.

My destination?

To visit Prina, of course.

She had been my most darling friend ever since we attended the small kingdom pod school when we were young. My family believed in a well-rounded education, and instead of hiring tutors, they sent us to the school where other young merfolk attended.

Since my sisters and I were royalty, no one was inclined to speak to us. We made only a handful of friends, as everyone was afraid of making the wrong impression on royalty. It was a shame, really. Despite not being the most social fish in the sea, I would have loved to experience what so many others did.

Thankfully, I was able to find all I wanted in Prina when I was young. She helped me experience the sleepovers, drama, and friendship that all the other merfolk do, and I will always be eternally grateful for her.

Our relationship hadn't ended when school did, though—it continued past our shell awards and into our adulthood. While there were fewer sleepovers, we still fought to make time for each other, and it was there I would spend the rest of my day.

Every time I headed to Prina's, all I needed to do was post a shell with a fin carved into it on my door and my family would know where I was. It was my introverted ways that had helped me learn to leave little notes to communicate throughout the palace.

I turned to go after setting up my note and felt someone swim headfirst into me.

“Oh goodness, oh no. Oh dear. Oh, I’m so sorry, Sage!” Prina’s voice sounded in my head and through my blurred vision, I could see her rub her head after our collision.

“Prina! I was just on my way to see you.” I could see bubbles swimming around my head as I fought to get my bearings back. “How did you know?”

“Oh, I had a feeling in my fin.” Of course, she did. It was no surprise, really; she had the uncanny ability to know when— “Did you forget you invited me over?”

Or that. It could be that, and not some mind-reading ability to know when I needed her.

“R-right…” I stumbled over my words.

“Too many royal duties these days. You’re all in a tizzy whenever I see you.” Her long ramble began. “Oh, I knew when you turned nineteen, you’d be overwhelmed, and now look what they’re doing to you.” She pushed her way past me into my bedroom, pulling the carved shell off my door. “Well, come on, then. I’m ready for the latest gossip.”

She always was.

CHAPTER THREE

I laid in bed that night, waiting for the ocean to darken, for those shell lamps to dull. Prina had left hours ago, and I had been left to my own thoughts for far too long, waiting to flee the comfort of my clam and escape.

I nearly burst with impatience before nighttime finally fell, and I could creak open my clam and look about the room. Naja often fell asleep in here, but it looked like she enjoyed her own bed more tonight. Here's hoping she had found the seaweed I had snuck in during lunch.

I took out a dark shawl to shield my skin and face. This was one of the few moments I was thankful to have a black tail. Of course, on the other hand, I was the only mermaid with a black tail, so I'd be easy to identify if caught.

I crept through the palace and swam through the servants' corridors before finally entering the freedom of night. If I swam quickly, I could make it up to the surface and possibly even venture to the coastline. I had noticed a grove the other day with rocks I could lean on to get a closer look.

It was an uneventful swim, so I managed to make it without any issues arising. As I burst through the surface and felt the night air envelop my face, I let out a laugh of delight. There was nothing like this. Nothing in all the worlds.

The ocean was something that had always loved me, always embraced me. From the first moment I remembered, she responded to me in a way that nothing and no one else could.

When I was sad, rain would fall over her waters. When I was happy, the sky would clear, and the ocean would find calmness in my emotions. When anger filled me, black clouds would loom on the horizon and the waters would thrash.

It was no wonder I couldn't resist the ocean, especially when she couldn't resist me.

My powers weren't very well-known by many, as my family feared what would become of me if others began to see. Thankfully, they only showed near the surface, so we had kept it a closely guarded secret.

I ducked underwater for a moment to look around before making my way to the grove I had spotted last night. It was the perfect place to get another look. No one would come at night, and of course, no one would be able to see me.

My tail swished behind me as I moved toward it. I could feel excitement course through my veins as I neared the grove. Oh, to touch… to really touch land. How incredible!

My hands reached out as I grabbed the rock and ran my fingers over it. It felt just like the rocks that lay on the ocean floor, yet it was so different. Of course, it was dry, and only lightly coated by the mist of saltwater spray.

I was too enchanted by the rock to realize that I most certainly was not alone.

"Hello," a voice whispered gently.

I gasped and pulled back.

"No, no, don't go! I don't want to interrupt your midnight summer swim."

I wrapped my shawl closer to my skin as Tove's warning washed over me. *A slaughter by a human.* The idea of it was most unappealing. A shadow had appeared above the rock, and I looked up.

It was a two-legger. His head was tilted as he
looked at me as curiously as I looked at him. "Well?" he asked. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

I shook my head. For all I knew, a strange dialect of clown fish would come out, and then I'd really be in trouble. As such, he hadn't seemed to notice my tail yet.

"Do you swim among the rocks often?" He sounded pleasant enough, and he was wearing an odd outfit of his own—a sort of white puffy shirt with black, closed off bottoms.

I stayed silent as I watched him.

"Are you a water spirit of some kind? Come to draw me out to sea?"

A giggle escaped before I could help it. I shook my head once more, not trusting my words.

He sat on the rock I had been stroking moments before and continued as though I had invited him to. “This is my favourite spot. I come here to think. I’ll share it though, if you’re in need of thinking as well.”

I smiled at him and slowly drifted closer. I placed my shawl on the rock and rested my head against it as I gazed up at him. The curiosity was overpowering as I took it all in.

He had dark, nearly black hair, and the shadow of a beard appeared on his face. His blue eyes shone like sapphires. He wore brown leather around his feet, which was humorous. I knew humans wore feet cushions, but seeing them in person was even more comical. I couldn’t imagine having my skin wrapped in so many layers.

“I haven’t seen you before,” he went on. “Maybe we’ve missed each other.”

I shook my head.

“Is this your first time here?”

I nodded.

A sound came from behind him—a hollow, echoing sound. It startled me, and I quickly pushed back.

“No, wait! It’s okay. It’s just my dog.”

I didn’t want to stay and find out what this terrifying, loud creature was. Meeting a human was enough for one night, and I couldn’t risk being dragged out of the water by whatever this was.

CHAPTER FOUR

I was home earlier than I had been the previous nights, which resulted in me wandering the halls early in the morning before breakfast. Perhaps my near run-in with death had caused my good sense to come rushing back to me. I couldn't believe what I had done.

I had spoken with a human.

Well, alright, I hadn't necessarily spoken. I had floated there silently, nodding and shaking my head when I saw fit to. Surely, he must have thought I couldn't speak. Not that it mattered what he thought, since I'd never see him again.

Or would I?

No! Absolutely not.

I heard voices down the hall and knew Flora and Naja were heading in my direction. Those two and their morning chatter. I didn't want to hear a single word from either of them until I had my brewed kelp.

I swam in a flurry to the breakfast room and jumped in surprise as I pulled on the door. Locked? How could it be locked? The voices moved closer, and I panicked. I grabbed the handle and started pulling it frantically. I must have looked a right fright as my sisters rounded the corner.

"There you are!" Flora threw her arms around me, and I mumbled a hello as she squeezed me out of existence. "Kai and I have invited everyone to our suite for breakfast this morning. I was just on my way to get you both."

So much for a quiet morning with my thoughts and brewed kelp. Now I'd have to listen to endless chatter between everyone. I didn't mind our family dinners together, but the idea of the constant prattling at this hour was enough to make a mermaid faint.

~

"Sage!" came a sudden scream in my ear. I startled and saw everyone staring at me, and Naja with a smirk on her lips.

"What on earth was that?" I demanded in shock.

"You were miles away."

"Yes, what on earth were you thinking about?" Flora inquired.

I sat there awkwardly. Father was stabbing a fork into his mushroom seaweed scramble. Mother was gazing at me curiously. Kai was too distracted, staring out the window as always. Flora and Naja were giving each other a look I didn't particularly care for.

"Ah, nothing," I quickly shot out.

"We saw her wandering the halls this morning… before breakfast."

Mother's eyebrow raised at Naja's comment. "My, that's unlike you. Trouble sleeping, dear?"

I nodded. "It's just been so busy—so much to do, so many things to prepare for." I looked down at where my closed goblet sat. The server had topped it up twice now, and I still hadn't managed to finish it all. I'd better drink it, or they'll know something has put me off my kelp. I took a long swig and soon after, everyone returned to their conversations.

Everyone except for Flora, whose eyes narrowed in my direction.

~

It didn't take long after swimming to my room before Flora showed up with Naja in tow. They didn't even wait for my answer after knocking before bursting into the room.

"We know you have a secret, Sage. Spit it out," was Naja's immediate accusation.

"Naja," Flora warned, "that's not how we approach sisterly conversations." They sat on the cushy couch of sand in the seating area, and Flora waved me over to them.

"I don't have any secrets. I'm just tired."

"You're always tired."

"Naja!" Flora repeated. Turning to me, she smiled gently. "There's a familiar look in your eyes. I've had it, and Naja has had it recently… although she'll try to deny it. You're enamoured with someone, with something."

I sat in front of them and stared at my sisters. After a moment, I decided to say all I could really say. "I've been sneaking out to see Tove."

A collective groan was heard from the two of them.

"We're not supposed to go see Tove; Father says she's a horrible influence, what with all her weird bottles and strange potions…" Even

sweet Flora shuddered as she spoke the words.
“Yeah, and you know what they say about her old school sweetheart. The man who was never seen again after breaking her heart.” Naja’s eyes glowed with intrigue.

“That’s gossip,” Flora corrected. “You should only speak facts.”

Naja rolled her eyes and moved on, very much used to Flora’s corrections by now. “Still. Father doesn’t approve of her, and neither do we, for that matter!”

And so began a long morning of lectures from my sisters, but at least the real truth wasn’t out. If they were this upset over a mere visit to a sea witch, I could only imagine how they’d feel about a human.

CHAPTER FIVE

I couldn’t believe I was doing this again. Especially after the terror of last night. Maybe I was crazy. Maybe I had some insane addiction to the risk. What was it called? Adrenaline?

At any rate, here I was, swimming to the surface once more. I tried to tell myself it was because I had left my favourite shawl there, but I knew that was a lie. I had left many other things there as well.

I didn’t break free through the water as I had many nights before. I wasn’t sure if this two-legger had seen anything when I left. He must have looked for me at the water’s edge for a while. He may have even surmised what I was.

I swam cautiously just under the waves so as not to catch anyone’s eye. When I neared the coastline, everything I thought on my way was confirmed.

He was there.

His shadow was something I could just barely make out through the haze of the water at night. Unlike yesterday’s clear skies, tonight was cloudy. I couldn’t imagine being out here during the daytime. It was already bright in the ocean during the day, but what would it be like under the warm sun?

There was something sitting next to him, an odd little creature that fidgeted and moved. He would throw something, the creature would get it, and then bring it back. What a strange thing to enjoy. Was this the creature from the other night? It couldn’t be.

I approached with caution and slowly raised my head from the water directly in front of the rocks. I watched him for some time before he noticed me and glanced over.

That hollowed sound from the night before started from the small creature, but thankfully, I was in a position to swim back a bit.

“You came!” the two-legger exclaimed excitedly. “I thought you might, seeing as how you’d forgotten something.”

I nodded. Would I actually be able to speak tonight?

He sat on the rock and that was when I noticed his leather foot wraps were missing. His feet swung into the water, and I watched him some more.

“I know Jax scared you away last time, but he’s harmless. Really, he wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

I had no idea what a flea was, but if it was anything like the creature next to him, I had every right to feel nervous.

“Jax, stay,” he commanded the creature, which stayed in place somehow. I swam a bit closer and eyed him. “He’s just your average dog, but I like him a lot.”

A dog? I slowly reached my hand out, and Jax looked up at the two-legger. At a faint “Yes,” Jax came closer and nestled under my hand. He was so soft, unlike anything I had ever felt before.

A few minutes of silence passed before the two-legger leaned closer with something in his hand. “Here. I dried it off for you. It was so wet, and I was sure you wouldn’t want it back.”

I giggled at that before accepting it and wrapping it around my body, drenching it once more. His eyebrow raised at that before letting out a chuckle himself.

“I’m Elias, by the way. I won’t bother asking your name since you clearly don’t speak much.” He waved his hand in my direction and I shrugged. “You disappeared so quickly last night that I couldn’t even see where you had come from.”

I was shocked even though I had assumed as much. It was a relief to hear. “Sage,” I found myself whispering.

“Pardon?” he asked in surprise.

“My name is Sage,” I said, my voice coming in more strongly. I held my hand out, waiting to make contact. I was about to touch him!

His hand, which was much larger than my slender one, enveloped mine and shook. I stared in wonderment as he continued to shake it.

“Why are you moving my hand like that?” I inquired.

“Like… like what? Like this handshake?”

“Handshake,” I repeated. “Interesting. A sound greeting.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “You’re something else, you know that?”

I smiled and pulled my hand out of his. I wasn’t used to a hand so warm and dry. It felt strange when all you’d ever felt were fins and such underwater.

This was going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

CHAPTER SIX

I didn’t learn my lesson after those two visits. In fact, afterward, my visits only increased. Elias and I were meeting every night. It was quickly becoming a tradition of sorts.

We spoke about our families, our lives, the expectations we felt from our parents. We talked as though we had known each other forever.

The things I learned were so plentiful, it was overwhelming at times. And yet, I needed to pretend to know about these things so he wouldn’t suspect who I really was or where I really came from.

There were moments when it was exhausting, but there were moments when it was exhilarating.

Until one night, just over a month into our meeting, when Elias asked one question that stilled my heart for a moment.

“Why are you always swimming?”

I froze. I had no response. The warm nights would come to an end, eventually; I couldn’t very well meet him in the dead of winter—only a crazy human would dive into these cold depths in the middle of a cold spell. But how could I not see him for an entire season? Why were human’s bodies so odd?

“Wouldn’t you feel more comfortable joining me on the rock?” There was a smirk on his face as he inquired with a light, flirting tone.

“I like the water,” I stated calmly.

“Perhaps I should just join you, then. I’m quite a good swimmer, actually. Learned with the best!”

“No!” He looked confused, and I quickly added, “I just mean… the water is so calm, so still. It’s a gentle relief from the craziness of my day.

He nodded thoughtfully, seeming to understand. “I know what you mean. That’s why I sit on these rocks so often. It’s a haven. A reprieve.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. It was an odd excuse, but it was one that had been effective. I wasn’t sure what I could do at this point. It had been

over a month, and even friends kept in closer proximity than we did—we hadn't shaken hands again or touched since the first time when I had learned about the strange handshake. Honestly, I didn't have much knowledge about human friends, but I knew mer-friends at least touched.

As I swam back to my home that night, I wondered what I could do. I had put myself into this strange predicament, and now I was trapped here with no options.

Except…

No, I couldn't. Tove had told me herself that she could never send someone to a slaughter, but Elias was so kind, so sweet! I hardly thought he was luring me to some strange demise. As Naja would say, the vibe just wasn't there. Her with her strange way of speaking…

I had to do it. I had to go see Tove.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Oh, my dearest darling, what brings you here?” Tove’s hellos were always elaborate as she placed her tail around me and kissed both cheeks. “Come, come. I’ve just brewed some fresh kelp. My fin told me you were coming.” She always knew exactly what I needed.

I viewed her as an aunt of sorts. I knew the merfolk avoided her, but I was thankful for her friendship. She was an odd mermaid. Decades had passed since her horrid attack, although she rarely spoke about it aside from some comments about humans here and there, with the occasional gripe about her scarred tail.

Given her less than savoury history with these types, I had to broach the topic gently.

“You’ve met a human,” she said as she pulled away.

I gasped, “How do you do that?”

She didn’t answer as she moved to her kitchen nook to grab a couple of closed goblets. Setting them on the table, she shook her head. “I knew your curiosity would win… All those questions you asked me throughout the years.”

I tried to stutter through my words as she poured the fresh brew, but I couldn’t find it in myself. I was so worried I’d disappoint her. “I-I didn’t m-mean to. It just… it sort of just… well, kind of… Well, it happened…” When I met her eyes, I was shocked to see understanding in them. I sat down and accepted the drink she offered while she moved to hold my hand.

“Child, I never expected you to have the same experiences I did. I never meant for you to think you had to have the same feelings. I merely wanted you to understand, to learn, that the things out there aren’t always as magical as our imaginations make them out to be.”

Tears filled my vision and before I knew it, I had to tell her everything. So I did—from swimming up to the shoreline, to touching the rocks, and finally, meeting Elias.

The whole time I shared, Tove nodded and took it all in. I was amazed she could be so calm in all of this. I knew I couldn't be the same way in her fins.

However, as I finished my tale, words I had never thought I could say to her came spilling out.

"Make me into a human."

There was silence in the kitchen. I realized I had finally surprised her, and the result wasn't good. Once my words registered, Tove pulled away with a darkened expression. Her chair went tumbling backward as she swam abruptly. "Never," she spat out.

"Please… I've got to know what it's like!" I begged as she furiously swam around the room, cleaning her shell brass counter.

"No! Don't you understand?" she threw out, her rag floating off as she propelled it to the table. "You already associate with one, but to turn you into one… I won't hear of it."

"Tove, you don't understand. I've simply got to try it. The things I've learned, the feelings I have. There are so many new things to experience."

Her face softened slightly as she moved toward me. "My darling, please, do not ask this of me. I, too, have felt what you have. There is nothing new under the sun. Just because it feels good now, does not mean it always will." Her hand caressed my arm.

The water around us grew saltier as we both cried—one from the memories of the past and one for the future experiences she may never receive.

"I knew you wouldn't understand… I knew you would turn against me."

Hurt flashed in Tove's eyes, but I couldn't stop my anger. Here was someone with all the power in the world to give me what I wanted yet, she refused.

"I'm sorry, my child. I cannot do this for you."

"I have to go," I blubbered as I pulled back and swam out of the door. I could hear her calling after me with every swish of my tail. I couldn't help myself from feeling the anger in every movement.

~

That night, a knock sounded outside of my door. I opened it and when I looked down, there was a small satchel tied together with a note secured. Looking around, I picked it up and withdrew into my room, closing the door softly. I hurried to read the note.

I am sorry that my bitterness took over. You see, I was once in love with a human. My heart was shattered, and my world was destroyed. Yet we cannot paint all experiences with the same brush. I pray yours is different.

Drink this potion, but be warned… there is a price.

When the clock strikes midnight, you will become a mermaid once more. For three hours, you will remain in this form. You will not be able to tell anyone this, for whenever you try, your voice will quiet and you will find yourself unable to speak. When you decide to remain quiet once more, your voice will return. Until one loves you in both forms, this is how it will be.

I wish you all the best,

Tove

Before I knew it, I was laughing in delight. Tonight! Tonight, I would be free to walk, to run, to do all the things these strange humans had done.

There was only one thing I had to do before I went.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Oh, what are you going on about now?” Prina’s confusion showed. “Some land mover?”

I groaned and tried to find the words to begin yet another explanation for her. How to make her understand I needed to be up there and experience things for myself.

“Prina, I’m asking a favour of you… a simple favour.” Slowly, I launched into the words needed to describe my plan as she gazed at me, her mouth slowly dropping open the more I said.

“You’ve met… a two-legger? A real one. And you want to become one of them… What?”

I admit, it was a hard thing to grasp. From Prina’s perspective, I had everything I would ever need right here. I was a princess, and I lived in a beautiful palace. In her eyes, I had it all. She struggled to understand why I would want more, why I would need more.

“He’s wonderful, Prina! Just incredible. I would have told you about him sooner, but I was so worried you would think I was—”

“Crazy? Insane? Sage, you are!” Her hands flew into the air as her mouth ran wild. “What do you even know about this land freak? For all you know, he eats mermaids for breakfast!”

“No, no. It’s not like that at all. We’ve talked for so long and—”

“So long? What do you mean, so long? Exactly how long has this been going on?”

“A… a month…” I winced.

“A *month*?!” Her incredulous gaze flashed a look of pain. “And what… you didn’t think I would want to know about this sooner?”

I rushed to Prina, throwing my arms around her. “Prina, I wanted to tell you the moment it happened, but I was so scared. You’re my best friend, and I couldn’t handle the thought of your disapproval. Tell me you don’t disapprove.”

She hesitated as her arms slowly wrapped around me in return. “Oh, of course I disapprove. I don’t want anything to happen to you. You’re safe here, with us. Your family, your friends, your kingdom.” She pulled back, but held me in her arms. “Sage, this is your life. Why do you keep looking outside of it?”

“Please,” I begged her. “I only need you to cover for me for a week. Two at most!”

She stared at me, her gaze moving down to my fins and back up again. “Alright, I’ll help you. On one condition…”

I waited.

“Tell me you’re not planning on wearing *that*.”

CHAPTER NINE

It was midnight before I was finally ready. I couldn't drink the potion in the next few hours anyway, as it wouldn't take proper effect. However, I still wanted to see Elias and enjoy this last evening—our final one before I took on the human form.

I swam with a renewed excitement with my bag at my side. There weren't many things suited for life on the land, but I had managed to pack a few shawls and some keepsakes. I left a carved shell saying I was away to visit Prina, as per our agreement.

I quickly glanced down at my open fin dress and knew I made the right decision. It was a midnight blue that blended in with the ocean, and a shimmer reflected off it when the light hit. The sleeves hung off my shoulders, and a small pearl belt around my waist made it sit just right. It was sure to be suitable for land.

At well past one, I broke out of the waves for the last time, not caring who saw me. I was far enough out that I knew it would likely be missed. I swam closer under the water before bursting out at our usual meeting spot.

"Took you long enough." Were Elias' first words to me.

I laughed and swam closer.

"You were swimming farther out today, weren't you? I thought I saw you out there." With a quick shake of my head, he continued, "It might have been a fish."

Oh, if he only knew he was right on both accounts…

There were crickets singing tonight as I picked up my sopping wet satchel and dropped it on the rocks. He gazed at it with curiosity.

"Why are you always bringing your things into the water? No one will steal these things if you just leave them on the rocks before diving in."

"Well, aren't you nosy?" I teased. "If you must know, it's so untrustworthy men like you don't come along and rummage through my stuff."

It was his turn to laugh, and he shook his head. “I’d never. A woman’s bag is her own business.”

The hours passed, but it felt like minutes. I glanced at the waterlog that I carried on my wrist and noted it was well past the time.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I said as I took my satchel and disappeared under the waves. I barely had a moment to register the confusion on his face before I was under the water.

I looked at the bottle that I held and felt excitement course through my veins. This was it. I was finally going to be human, and it was going to be wonderful.

With a quick gulp, my excitement was replaced with searing pain.

Wait… Did I do this right?

CHAPTER TEN

"Sage!" I heard my name being called as I came to. I was floating somehow. No, that wasn't right. I was still underwater. My lungs were on fire as darkness surrounded me. What was happening? Why couldn't I breathe?

I felt the water next to me move and a large sound ripped through. I felt arms grab me as I was suddenly pulled out of the water, gasping for breath.

"What on earth are you doing? Trying to drown yourself?" I coughed and sputtered as Elias kept us afloat. "Here, take hold of this rock."

I was trying to move my legs in one solid motion, but everything was going wrong. The constant coughing was throwing off my rhythm, my body was aching everywhere from the water hitting it from all directions. The only reminder I had of being a mermaid was the cold blood moving through me.

Everything else was gone.

"I'm fine, I'm okay," I sputtered. With his arms wrapped around me, I managed to come out of the water and lie down with my back against the cold rocks.

I had barely recovered before I suddenly realized what was under my dress.

Legs.

I had legs.

I couldn't believe it. Gone was the familiar swish of my tail, replaced with long, stick-like figures. I wanted to inspect them, but with Elias next to me, I suddenly felt shy. Sitting up, I looked over at him.

He was watching me with a mesmerized expression, and in the softest voice, said, "You've never been up here before."

I nodded. "I know."

He reached out to touch my face before he suddenly pulled back. “Sorry. I… uh, I mean, welcome here.” He laughed nervously.

I gave him a smile in response and turned to look out toward the ocean. It looked different from here. It was no longer something I was in, but something I was seeing from the outside.

There were clouds above me, moving with the wind, covering the moon from time to time. A faint glow of moonlight shone on the water as waves washed toward the shore. If you looked closely, or if you knew the ocean, you could see the faint bubbles of life coming from below.

When I turned back to Elias, he was still gazing at me. Curiosity painted his face as he looked down at what I was wearing.

“So, do you always swim in a dress?”

I threw back my head and laughed like I had never laughed before.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My first day as a human passed by in a blur. If you asked me what I had done or what I had said, I could only tell you bits and pieces.

What I could tell you about were my first steps as a human.

When dawn appeared over the ocean, Elias stood to go. I stayed seated and wondered how I could even summon the strength or willpower to stand. How did humans stay so balanced without water around to hold themselves up? It was a mystery, to be sure.

"Sage?" Elias' voice broke into my thoughts. "Are you planning on going home, or are you just going to sit there?"

I cleared my throat before letting out a nervous laugh. "I actually don't have a home… around here. Kind of just visiting."

Silence stretched out before I looked up at him. His face showed confusion as he breathed out, "So, where have you been going when we say goodbye?"

I smiled silently and just stared at him.

He nodded slowly before flashing a hesitant smile in response. "Right. Always wanting to stay secretive." He held his hands up before I could counter. "Hey, it's alright. My parents will kill me for this, but I guess if you don't know anyone, you can just come stay with us for a bit. No idea how we'll be able to explain that, but…"

So humans just invited strangers into their homes without knowing a thing about them? No knowledge of where I was from, who I really was, or what I was? No wonder Tove thought they weren't the brightest of creatures.

I finally moved to stand, but found myself stumbling. Not only do these people stay balanced without water around them, but they do it with just two stick-like limbs? Fascinating!

Elias reached out and grabbed my arm to steady me. "That water really knocked you off balance, huh?"

Oh, he had no idea.

"Your ankles look a little swollen. Here, I'll give you a hand on the way up." With his arm wrapping around my waist and one hand reaching across to take hold of mine, he held me up as I began to take my first steps.

It was incredible. Here I was, walking along a beach, moving my own two legs. It felt wonderful. Slowly, I moved away from Elias to see if I could balance by myself. Jax appeared and began to walk with us, ambling over rocks.

Before I knew it, I was walking ahead of him, picking up speed. I looked down and watched my legs move faster and faster. Wind blew through my hair as I watched them. Jax began to run with me, making those barking sounds, as Elias referred to them.

A voice called out from behind, and I slowed down. When I turned, Elias was far behind me. "Where are you going? You don't even know the way!" he called out, laughing.

"Well, lead the way, then!" I yelled back, the wind carrying my words to him.

And suddenly, in a matter of moments, we were standing before a large castle and Elias was telling me, "Welcome home."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"You can't be serious, Elias!"

I was about to enter the dining room after being shown to my chamber for the duration of my visit, and I could hear the hushed words spoken as I came to a halt outside the barely open door.

"I'm quite serious."

"You claim you found this girl, who you've met on the beach, and decide to what… just bring her here? What do you know of her? Where is she from? Who is she?"

These were the questions I had expected when Elias invited me. Perhaps he was one of the less bright humans? Although that couldn't be true, because we had all sorts of intellectual conversations in the last month, including him explaining how so many odd contraptions worked.

"Father, please. I know everything I need to know."

"If you can't answer these questions, you most certainly do not!" the voice boomed.

"Milas, please." A gentle voice entered the conversation. "You know what these situations do to your heart. Stay calm, my king." A short pause. "Elias, your father's right. What do you know of her?"

Elias sputtered as he tried to come up with answers. Truthfully, there probably wasn't much. I had been shockingly cryptic when it came to sharing aspects of my life. He knew about my family and the names of my sisters, but more than that and he would come up blank. Perhaps now was as good a time as any to enter.

I opened the door and walked in to see Elias and his parents. I bowed my head as well as I was able, but didn't trust my legs to do the same.

"Good morning, my name is Sage."

I knew I would sound like a coral reef girl given how I hadn't the slightest clue on how to address them with their titles. They'd think of me as being quite ignorant. Perhaps my good manners could make up for that.

The queen had a kind smile as she looked me over. "Good morning, Sage. I trust you had a pleasant time refreshing yourself?" She looked to be in her forties, with large violet eyes. The hair around her temple showed signs of graying, but the rest was a cheery blonde and sitting atop it was a thin golden circlet.

The king, on the other hand, was intimidating. His face was serious, and there wasn't a smile to be seen. His eyes narrowed as I looked at him, and his gray eyes bore into mine. He was a good decade older than the queen and, as such, had a full head of gray hair.

"Yes, thank you. The room I was shown to is beautiful. I shall enjoy my stay very much."

The king's eyebrows raised and his mouth opened as though he was about to speak. Before a word came out, Elias jumped in, "I'm glad! Come, join us for lunch, and you can tell my parents a little about yourself."

And so began my first meal with the king and queen.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You handled yourself very well with my father."

I smiled and nodded in Elias' direction—my usual response to his compliments. The day had passed by with endless questions that I answered to the best of my abilities. After lunch, I had been dragged out by Queen Astrid to the shopping district, and she had purchased far too many dresses for me.

"I've never had a daughter, so this will be fun. I'm unsure if your current style will fit in here. It's quite lovely, but so very different from anything I've ever seen." She had rambled on, "Oh, I know you likely can't stay with us long, but still… The castle can feel stuffed up."

Dinner had passed with much the same conversation with her as we chose to dine in town. It was strange being with this woman I hadn't known even twenty-four hours ago, yet here we were, shopping, talking… treating me like her long-lost daughter. She reminded me so much of my own mother.

Elias' voice brought me back to the present. "I thought with you being around more, you might talk more, but you're still pretty quiet."

More silence. We were walking around the castle. I was wearing a new peach-colored gown Queen Astrid had chosen for me, and he was talking, much like his mother.

"It's alright. I talk enough for two people… maybe even three."

"You're right," I spoke up. "You're the most talkative person I've ever met."

He laughed, and we continued down the corridor. As we walked, he pointed out people in the portraits that surrounded us. "In this painting, we have my great-uncle Salamain. Over there, is my Grandmother Ednar. Strange name for a woman, but who am I to question? She came from another kingdom. The Kingdom of Rayani…" he trailed off. "Would you like to see the gardens?"

A garden on land? Now that would be a sight to behold. “A garden? Oh goodness, I’ve never seen one before. I’d love to!” I gushed out, perhaps a little out of character.

He looked at me in shock. “You’ve never… seen a garden? Have you been living under a rock?”

In a sense…

He took my arm and guided me down the hall, with Jax trailing after us. We passed numerous guards as we turned down various corridors and finally met the smell of fresh air. I noticed two people trailing behind us.

“They always do that when I’m walking around. You get used to them pretty quickly.” He waved his hand at them in a strange motion, and they fell further behind us, nearly out of sight.

It was a stunning evening out. The moon was a glowing orb in the sky, but outside of the water, I could see it so clearly. The twinkling stars made me feel like I was shining on the inside. There was the sound of crickets in the air, and I could barely take my eyes off the night scenery in front of me.

We walked down the main, torch-lit pathway, and Elias turned me down a smaller path. My arm was still tucked into his as he led me through an orchard before reaching a row of hedges. He smiled in my direction before pulling me into the shrubbery onto an even smaller path. Jax no longer followed, and neither did the guards.

I suddenly realized what he was doing. “You don’t like your guards.”

“I may be used to them, but I don’t have to like having them. They’ll know I’m in here and stay where they are to guard the entrance.”

I stood there unmoving while I looked up at him. “They’re there to keep you safe.”

“I’ll be perfectly safe in here.”

“Will you?” I asked slyly. “How do you know I’m not some assassin from a faraway kingdom sent here to win you over and then dispose of you?”

“Do you think you’re winning me over?” he asked with a smirk.

I froze for a moment, suddenly aware of the words that had slipped out. I pulled my arm away from him, but his hold tightened before moving a step forward, taking me with him.

“I only mean… I just… I meant that… You never know when you’re truly safe,” I responded lamely.

He stared straight ahead and said without any expression, “You don’t enjoy being teased, do you?”

“I don’t always understand when I’m being teased.”

“Then perhaps it is my job to teach you.”

I hardly knew what to say. Here we were, walking along on a moonlit path, arm in arm, talking quietly, and I suddenly realized we were completely alone. It was different than before. Where we had once been separated by land and water, we were now together. Separated by nothing.

Well, nothing except my blatant awkwardness and his cool silence.

We reached the center of the hedges, and when I looked up, I could no longer see the sky.

“When my father was first installed as king, he commissioned ivy to be grown over the center of the hedge maze. His father had watched him like a hawk, so he craved privacy. Since then, this has been titled, The Prince’s Haven. It is the only place in the entire castle where I can be alone and unseen.”

His explanation moved me as it made me realize there was a warm, loving man beneath his father’s collected exterior. Someone who cared for his family and the quality of life they were living.

There was just one thing that didn’t make sense… “How were you able to visit the ocean every night?” I waited for an answer as I stared up at the tendrils of ivy.

Elias turned to look at me. “You’d never believe it if I told you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There was something in his expression that I couldn't read. A mysterious darkness that seemed to lie just beneath the surface.

"What do you mean?"

He sighed and gestured to a bench in the middle of the hedged garden. I took a seat, but he chose to pace in front of me, more restless than I'd seen him before.

"You're going to think I'm crazy, and I know that because every time I've tried to explain it to my parents, they don't seem to understand." He stopped in front of me and ran a hand through his thick hair. "I get out through a grate that's hidden in my room. It leads to an outer wall, and I'm able to climb into it and crawl my way out. It takes about half an hour to reach the outer wall, but once I'm there, I'm free. Of course, no one can ever know about it because it poses a security risk…" He looked at me expectantly.

"I won't breathe a word," I assured him. "But I don't really get how that's hard to believe." Especially given how hard it is to slip out of my underwater palace where someone could easily just swim to you.

A gust of wind blew into our hidden spot, and I wrapped my arms around myself. Elias shrugged out of his coat and leaned over to lay it over my shoulders. I thanked him and smiled, but was met with a guarded expression.

"Ever since I was around eight, I've had this strange attraction to the sea. I feel like it calls to me. Every night when I try to sleep, I hear the sound of the waves beckoning to me."

His pacing continued.

"What do you mean, they beckon you?"

"I mean, they call me! Speak to me! I mean that when silence comes, that's when the ocean begins calling me."

"Calling you?" I questioned. "Like a voice?"

“I don’t know. There’s a voice that sings sometimes, and I hear it. A beautiful voice I’ve never heard before. But even without the singing, I feel something whenever I think about the ocean.” He grew more aggravated the more he told me. Like he was scared and then angry about something.

“What do you feel?”

“Have you ever felt like you were drowning?”

Oh, what an impossible question to answer. If the sensation I had earlier today was even remotely close to what drowning felt like, then perhaps I had. Thankfully, he didn’t wait for a response.

“Months ago, the call became more intense. One night it was so strong, I couldn’t bear it. I left the castle and made my way out. I stumbled through the mist and found my way to the rocks. That was the night…”

“What? What happened that night?”

He walked over to me and stopped in front of me. “That was the night I met you.”

I couldn’t breathe. What was happening? Had he somehow guessed what I was? Was this some big reveal for him to suddenly go, “Ha! I knew what you were all along!”

But there were only his blue eyes, intense and raw, boring down into me. He grasped my hands as he pulled me to stand. He was nearly a head taller than me, and I couldn’t bring my eyes to leave his.

His voice dropped to a low whisper. “The only time I’ve ever felt the call turn silent was when I met you… and it’s been silent every night I’ve seen you since. When you appear, when you’re around, the ocean doesn’t call anymore. I can’t explain it.”

“I don’t know what to say…” I whispered.

“There’s nothing to say.” His hands raised to my face. One hand pushed my hair back, and the other stroked my cheek. My heart began to beat faster, and I knew my cheeks were flushed.

“Elias,” I whispered, longing to ask him what was happening between us.

I felt his hands tilt my head back as he lowered his head, lips gently meeting mine. It was an innocent kiss, one I had never experienced before. There was a light passion, a hint of longing, but mostly, it was a feeling of two kindred spirits coming together, meeting under the ivy in the moonlight.

He pulled back and looked at me. My arms had found their way around him, and his dropped to hold me.

“Sage,” was his response before he kissed me again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

This was unlike anything I could have dreamed of. I went to bed that night, unsure if I even wanted to close my eyes and dream. Nothing could change this moment. Nothing could spoil the complete and utter bliss I had found in this human realm.

For a moment, I let myself forget that I was a mermaid—that I was only here for a short time. That there could be no possible future for Elias and me.

For a moment, I allowed myself to exist in these dreams I had created for myself.

Here I was, a nineteen-year-old woman, laying on a four-poster bed. The large comforter kicked down around my ankles as familiar cold blood moved through me. My two legs stretched out, and I felt like I belonged.

I knew I should feel frightened and nervous in this place, so why did I feel so at home?

Why did everything about my life feel so perfect here?

I was no longer a creature swimming in the vast ocean below the castle. I was Sage. I was human.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as I welcomed sleep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next days were filled with Elias and me sneaking around and exchanging small kisses. They were nothing like the night of our first kiss, but I preferred this.

My only experience with romance had been with a boy I had been seeing when I was fifteen, yet this still felt like a whole new world to me. That felt like a schoolgirl crush, but this felt like something more. And I wasn't sure how to explain it.

We spent many afternoons in the hedge garden. I would lay on the grass, and Elias would ramble on about various stories from his life. He would ask the occasional question about mine, and I would smile and answer with as few words as possible. He would make a joke about getting me to talk more.

I couldn't help that I didn't say much, and it was growing more and more difficult to keep my mouth shut about myself. Not that I could say anything to begin with, given the potion I had drank.

It was all going well until one day, about a week after our first evening stroll, Elias brought up the question I had dreaded.

"We haven't gone for an evening swim since you first came here. Would you like to sneak out tonight and enjoy one?"

I couldn't speak, and not because of the potion. It was like everything in me stopped working, and I had no idea how to respond.

When the clock strikes midnight, you will become a mermaid once more. For three hours, you will remain in this form.

Tove's note swam in my vision. I could hear her voice, and I didn't know how to avoid this. Every night I had experienced this change—there was no avoiding it. My legs would form together to bring my tail back to me, then split again with debilitating pain. I opened my eyes and looked

over at him from my spot on the grass to find him sitting up and waiting for a response.

“I suppose.”

“You suppose? I ask you to go to the place we first met, and you tell me ‘I suppose?’ Talk about a tough nut to crack.” He leaned over and ruffled my hair before standing and offering me his hand.

He helped me up and started on his way back, but I couldn’t convince my feet to move. My vision grew hazy as I fought to remain upright. He would find out. There was no getting around it.

“Sage? What’s wrong?” He was beside me in an instant, his hand on my arm.

“I’m fine. I stood up too fast. I’m okay.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve never had legs. Clumsiest woman I’ve ever met,” he teased with a sparkle in his eyes. At the flash of annoyance on my face, he took off running.

“For someone two years my senior, you sure have a lot of growing up to do!” I called out before taking off after him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I groaned as I stared at myself in the mirror. How in all the seven seas was I going to pull this off? There was no way I could hide the fact that I have a big black tail following me wherever I go. With my luck, he'd yell shark and spear it right through! We'd surely be out past midnight when the change takes place.

Shudders ran along my body and goosebumps appeared—a rare occurrence since I never felt cold out of water. I hadn't been swimming since changing, despite waking up twice a night to the transformation to a tail and back to legs again.

The feeling of my tail coming back to me was a welcome one. However, the pain of it searing in two every night when the clock struck three, when I changed back into human form, was something I could do without. I'd be sleeping peacefully and a pain unlike any other would take over, and even though it would only last for a few minutes, it felt like hours. He was coming to my room to collect me before we'd make our way down the hall back to his. I had never seen his room before, but somehow all I could fixate on was the fact that tonight, a man I was falling for, might see exactly what I was. And he might hate it.

I don't know what I was expecting. It's not as though I could remain in human form forever. Even if I somehow managed to find a way, what would I tell my family back home? I didn't even know if they had found my note, and if they had, would they contact Prina?

Throwing myself back onto the bed, I felt tears fill my vision as I realized what a tangled web I'd woven myself into. One problem led to another, and before I knew it, my mind was a pool of endless disasters.

From my family, who I hadn't seen this past week, to Elias and the care I felt for him. From being a mermaid to being a human, over and over again. From spending time with Elias, and agonizing over the unavoidable form he would see me in tonight.

His knock sounded on the door, waking me from my thoughts. I sighed and reminded myself it was now or never. I opened the door to Elias' ready grin, and his mouth began to move as I forced myself to focus and listen.

"I packed a few snacks." He held up a satchel. "I also brought some towels and a change of clothes just in case…"

It took me a moment to realize I was wearing exactly what I had worn the night we met. It had been a feeble attempt to hide what could become of my tail. I wasn't even sure if it would work. What would he think about all this?

"You're wearing that dress. The one you wore when you finally… I like it." For once, he seemed speechless.

I smirked at him. "Are you finally out of words?"

He laughed and grabbed my hand, pulling me along. "Come on, we don't have much time."

I'd never remember the twists and turns we ran through the corridor that night. How anyone could make their way through a place like this without a headache was beyond me. A familiar pain hit me as I remembered my palace back home. So simple, so straightforward; everything was just a swim away.

We finally rounded a corner, and he gestured to a large door. "This is my room. I sent the guards to fetch me something. I thought I'd sneak you in while they were away. I'm not sure how we'll get you back to your room, but that's a mystery for later."

Elias opened the door and with an unceremonious shove, I was in. I barely had a chance to look around before he rushed across the room and pushed aside a large wardrobe.

"Um… Elias?"

He looked over at me as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. "Yeah?"

"What are you doing?"

He stopped for a moment as he looked at me. "Oh, I'm just moving this wardrobe because the grate that goes outside is under it. I can't very well leave a large grate uncovered in my room for someone to stumble across. They'd seal it."

"Right." I nodded. *Such an odd man…*

Suddenly, I realized where I was. Elias' room… his very bedroom. I looked around to take it in. It was furnished well, but somewhat sparse. His bed was piled high with comforters, and a large stuffed bear rested on it.

His gaze followed mine, and he flushed when he realized I'd found his stuffed bear. "Christening gift," he mumbled, "from Mother."

I smiled. From there, my eyes found more to look at. Clothes were strewn across the floor around his desk and pictures covered the walls. But they weren't just any pictures. I walked closer to the wall to look at them. They were all drawings and paintings, and they were all of one thing.

The ocean.

During sunrises. Through sunsets. Dark storms. Bright lightning touching the waves. Fish swimming below the surface. Humans swimming along the shoreline. My heart stopped for a moment.

No, not humans…

Mermaids.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hey, Sage. Sage. Wake up. Come on.” I woke to see Elias leaning over me, concern on his face. “Are you okay?”

I scrambled to sit up, and all I could do was point at the drawings. He was confused and followed my finger. I pushed myself to stand and grabbed his arm, dragging him with me. “Look,” I whispered. “Mermaids.”

Understanding dawned on his face, and he laughed. “What? Are you scared of mermaids or something? Relax! They’re just drawings.”

“No, I didn’t expect to see them. Do you see them sometimes? Along the coast?”

Elias laughed again. “They’re not real. These are just drawings based on books I used to read as a child about mythical creatures and sailor’s stories. Nothing serious.” His laughter faded as he leaned in closer to me. I turned to avoid his gaze as my eyes fell on the drawings. *Not real? Mythical?* There was no way this would go well.

To know he didn’t even think I existed in that form shocked me. What was I thinking? What was I doing here? There was no way any good could come from this.

A knock made me jump, and he put his hand on my arm. “Hey, it’s alright. The guards are just letting me know they have come back.” He walked over to the door and knocked back in response.

Elias raised a finger to his lips and gestured for me to step out of view from the door. He opened it with a smile on his face and grabbed a small packet that was handed to him. “Thanks, Sven. I thought some late-night reading would do me good.”

Closing the door, he winked in my direction.

I forced a smile to my lips and tried to match his enthusiasm. The feelings of dread were growing stronger by the minute, and I had no idea how I could pull this off.

He made his way over to where the wardrobe once stood and dropped to his knees. With a tempting grin in my direction, he asked, “Are you ready?”

No, my heart screamed.

Yet, I couldn’t resist.

~

Running through the small tunnel beneath his room was exhilarating. Well, exhilarating and dark. Elias had explained we couldn't dare risk a light, even if we were underground, as even the smallest ray could be picked up at the tunnel's end and we needed to be discreet.

I wrinkled my nose at the stale scent that hit me as soon as I'd followed Elias into the grate. "Won't someone see it's open if they come to check on you?"

"No." He smirked. "Because I'm not five and it's not nap time."

My response was to roll my eyes, even though he couldn't see me. His chattiness often gave way to sarcasm, but I was learning to live with it. "Could have fooled me," I mumbled.

"Sorry, what was that?" he called over his shoulder.

"*Delightful.* You're delightful."

"I doubt that's what you said, but thank you. I bow to your compliments." He stopped and held a hand behind me to signal. "We'll have to wait a moment. There are guards who walk through here every half hour. Once they've passed, we can move this grate to get out."

"There are guards?!" I sputtered. He raised a finger to his lips, and I lowered my voice. "You didn't tell me there was a patrol out here."

"Yes, because every castle is left unguarded, especially at night." His sass returned. "Of course there are guards."

We passed the next few minutes in silence and suddenly, there was the crunch of gravel in the distance moving closer.

"Ah yes, the famous guards," I whispered to him. I could practically feel his stare and fought the urge to giggle.

I could hear the waves crashing in the distance while the nighttime birds sang. The guards' voices drifted closer, then faded as they passed us by.

"It's always so exciting leaving home," Elias whispered to me.

I was about to be closer to home than I'd been in a week.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The first thing I did when the fresh air hit my face was glance up to where the moon hung in the sky. This was cutting it close. How would I make it to the water, dive under, and somehow hide that I had a tail for three hours?

Maybe I should just tell him…

No, no. The look on his face after asking if he'd seen a mermaid was enough for me to hide it forever.

Forever… Who was I kidding? There was no forever. It was only a matter of time before I needed to return home. My father would probably pass out if he knew where I was, and worse, who I was with.

"You've been pretty quiet back there," Elias remarked as he took my hand to help me up a set of rocks.

"Just admiring the nighttime beauty." A good excuse as any. "It's been some time since I've enjoyed a midnight excursion."

"I know what you mean. Palace life is suffocating." Before I could say a word, his hands were around my waist, and he was swinging me up onto the short wall that separated the beach from the rest of the area.

We walked along the shore for a few minutes while Elias chattered on as usual. I don't think a single thing could strike a word from his lips—other than when we had sat on the rocks together for the first time. This man had a vocabulary so endless, it was a wonder people's ears didn't fall off whenever he talked. Not mine, of course; I could listen all day, all night.

Endlessly.

He took my hand and raised the other to point. "There," he said. "That's where I first saw you. The crazy woman swimming in the spring ocean."

I smiled at his memories. Had it really been over a month since we first met? The faint smell of summer lingered in the air as the seasonal

change would arrive. I always felt like it was so much more recent, yet, at the same time, it felt like we had known each other forever.

We made our way to the rocks, and he turned to me, wrapping his arms around me and dropping a kiss on my forehead. “These days have been a dream, Sage. Thank you,” he whispered into my hair.
We stood like that, frozen in time. I lost myself in the comfort of his arms and the feeling of contentment that surrounded me.

Suddenly, the pain hit.

No. No, this couldn’t happen. I had been so careful; I knew I shouldn’t have gotten swept up in the moment.

I felt my body start to move inside, and I tried to pull away from Elias. His arms loosened but didn’t fall as he looked down at me in confusion. “Sage, what’s wrong?”

But I couldn’t answer. It was happening, right here and now. Oh, this was a nightmare. I rushed to pull away, and he was forced to drop his arms.

“Was it something I said?” he asked, concern lacing his voice. “Sage, answer me! You’ve gone pale.”

I made it halfway down the rocks before my body crumpled. So close… I was so close. Just one more push. I could feel the ocean spray hit my face as it crashed against the rocks. If I just forced myself to move one more step…

The realization washed over me in that moment. I had changed. I was lying face-down on the rocks, unable to move what once had been legs. I forced my arms to push up and rotate my body around to face him.

My dress had covered most of what I had, but there was no mistaking the swish of my black tail. His eyes were fixated on it, mouth open, and I could tell he was struggling to find the words.

Our gazes finally met, but there was so much on his face I couldn’t read.

“Elias…” I whispered. “I-I don’t… I mean, I can’t…”

“I don’t understand.” His body shook, and I tried to reach up to him. Curse this tail and the limitations it gave me.

“I can explain.” I rushed out, eager to tell what I could to erase the stricken look on his face. My voice suddenly felt stripped, and when I tried to open my eyes again, there was only silence.

Tove’s warning echoed in my mind.

You will not be able to tell anyone this. For whenever you try, your voice will quiet, and you will find yourself unable to speak the words. When you decide to remain quiet once more, your voice will return. Until one loves you in both forms, this is how it will be.

Elias didn’t seem to notice the panic that took over my body. He lowered himself down to the sand, never taking his eyes from me. The mistrust on his face was clear, and it shook me to my core.

“I need a moment,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Time seemed to drag as I squirmed under his unrelenting gaze. There was something that had always been so penetrating about his stare, and in this moment, it was amplified.

I couldn't say a thing. Nothing. What could I do?

"It all makes sense…" He shook his head once, then again. "You were always in the water."

It was my turn to nod.

"Wait, are you a shapeshifter?" Fear lit his face as he pulled away from me.

I shook my head, but panicked. This wasn't going well, not at all. He would soon think I was being silent from indifference, but that couldn't be further from the truth!

"How long were you planning on keeping this from me? Did you think I would never notice that you were… That you were…" Elias gestured to my tail. "*This*."

Tears formed in my eyes and threatened to spill over.

"How do mermaids cry?"

My eyes flew back to him in shock.

"Never mind. I just… This is all so strange. I don't know what to say or ask." He covered his face, and I longed to pull his hands away and explain more.

I did all I could do. I turned away from him and began to place distance between us.

"No. No! Don't go!" he called. "I want you to make me understand. I want to know why someone, who has all the freedom of the ocean, would confine herself to land?"

And now I truly was speechless. Freedom? The ocean felt like a dungeon at times. This was where the birds sang and the trees bent in the wind. *This* was freedom.

My eyes darted to the ocean. I couldn't hide my desire to swim. It had been so long since my tail had moved in the water and my body had felt the pressure of the waves.

"Do you need a moment?" At my answering nod, he seemed to breathe easier. "Go on. I'll be here."

I could have thrown myself into his arms right then and there if not for our current awkward situation. If only I could find a way to tell him. Writing

was different for us since ours was underwater and his was on land. I couldn't very well sign anything to him. Perhaps I needed a swim to clear my mind.

He watched me curiously as my arms pulled my body into the water. I slipped in off the rocks and felt the coolness envelop me. I felt my body shudder with delight as I embraced the cold, familiar temperature. I swam deeper and turned toward the surface, propelling my body faster before pushing through and flying in the air. Landing headfirst in the water, I dove into the depths.

A few moments later, my head popped out of the water, and I swam closer to the rocks where Elias was watching. The look on his face had been replaced with an unprecedented curiosity as his head tilted to one side.

The time apart had helped my voice return as my thoughts were distracted. I wasn't sure how much I could force out before my mind returned to the issue at present. "S-sorry," I stuttered. "It's been a while since—"

"I figured," he cut me off awkwardly. "Walking must feel so foreign to you."

"Not anymore," I rushed to respond. "It did, but—" There went my voice. Oh, how I wanted to throw myself down and cry my building tears of frustration.

I leaned my arms against the rocks and laid my chin to rest over them. We watched each other for some time, not knowing what to say. There were so many things I wanted to pour out, but I knew he was likely overwhelmed enough as it was, and my words were silenced.

"So…" he started. "This is probably the longest I've ever been silent." A strained chuckle came out, and he flashed me a wry smile. "Except when we're—" It wasn't the magic that cut me off this time.

"Kissing?" he offered. "This whole time I've been kissing a mermaid."

"Well, technically, a human. You've been kissing a human," I added. "I'm only a—" I wanted to scream. My tail flicked away a piece of seaweed that had floated toward me, and his eyes jumped to watch. As I floated in place, he watched as my tail moved out of the water and splayed itself, the moonlight sparkling off the water droplets that fell. I held my breath as his eyes took on a different glow.

“It’s… it looks unlike anything I’ve ever seen.” He moved a bit closer and then looked at me warily. Slowly, inch by inch, until he was before me. “Wait here.”

I felt confusion take over as I silently floated in the water. Enjoying the feel of my tail, dreading the discomfort that the situation brought, and wondering what he could possibly be doing.

Elias returned from deeper within the cave, and he held what appeared to be a satchel. He was rummaging through it and pulling out food, blankets, and the like. “I knew storing a sketchpad would come in handy.”

I knew I couldn’t hide the shock painting my features. I had just revealed my biggest secret to him, and he wanted to sit there like some random street artist from his mother’s plaza and draw a tail?

As he noted my expression, he added, “It helps me think. Would you mind?”

I shook my head. Did I really have a choice? All I wanted to do was explain and, as such, my voice was gone. I couldn’t believe the turn this day had brought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The silence stretched on as Elias continued to draw. All I could hear from his direction were the scratches on his pad as he mumbled to himself. He ripped a page off and crumpled it, tossing it next to him.

"Would you mind turning slightly to the left? Can you lean back a bit and have your tail out more?" He looked up at me and I followed his direction. "Maybe turn a little more, so the moon is right by you. There! Perfect. Don't budge."

This was how this odd man wanted to spend his time after finding out I was a mermaid? This was ridiculous! What about the questions? The uncertainty? Where were his doubts?

I was playing model for a man who, not ten minutes ago, didn't even know mermaids existed. Now here I was, likely earning a place in his collection of ocean drawings proudly displayed on his wall. This was unbelievable. When I got my legs back, I fully intended to knock him upside the head.

The minutes passed by, and he finally closed his sketchpad. Time had moved slowly, but he was finally done, and I was preparing myself for a barrage of normal questions.

"Are you done yet?" I managed to ask.

"I am, thank you." He moved toward me and gestured me to come closer. "Can I feel your tail?"

These were more in line with the topics I was expecting him to bring up. I nodded and brought my tail to the edge of the rocks, preparing myself for the ticklish sensation it was about to bring.

He was gentle and wary at first, but then he became more confident and secure in himself. "Does it hurt?"

I shook my head.

He was clearly enraptured as his hand brushed up and down above my fin. The sensation caused giggles to escape my lips. "It tickles?" he

asked, his hand pausing along my scales.

I nodded with a smile.

“It’s beautiful,” he breathed in awe. “I wasn’t expecting it all to be so beautiful.”

I propped my left elbow onto the rock as he continued to make his observations. Certain movements caused my tail to twitch, but he didn’t seem to shy away like he had in the beginning.

After some time, he stopped and turned to me with a serious expression. “I know there’s so little I know, but I wanted to tell you…” he trailed off. “I have to tell you, Sage, this doesn’t change anything for me. I care about you… a lot.”

My heart lifted as his words poured out. Was this finally it? Could I finally tell him everything?

“I know you’re still you, and it doesn’t matter what you look like. I’m okay with that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Relief encompassed me as I threw my arms around him. His body stiffened a bit at my cold, wet touch, and all I could say was, “Thank you, thank you!”

“Sage, the water’s too cold for this!” came his petulant response as his arms forced me away.

“Sorry, I’m just so pleased. I can finally explain.”

Words came bubbling out faster than I could control the mess of jumbled thoughts, stories, and ideas.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying at all. Were you not able to speak this whole time? What have I been hearing? Who have I been talking to, then?”

I groaned impatiently. “No! I haven’t been able to talk whenever mermaids came up.”

He held his hand up for me to stop. “I just found out mermaids really exist, and there’s some kind of potion magic… This is all a bit much, so you’re going to need to slow down.”

I looked at him for a moment before taking a deep breath. “Me drink potion. Me turn human. Me no talk about mermaids.”

“I said slow down, not dumb it down!” His eyes narrowed. “So every time you opened your mouth, you couldn’t explain anything? Is that why you were so silent when we met?”

For a man who spoke so much and carried so much in his mind, he caught on surprisingly slowly. I had to remind myself that while mermaids all knew humans existed; it seemed humans didn’t know about us at all.

“What? No. I didn’t say much when we met because I’m shy…”

“Oh. Right. Of course.” His brows furrowed as I watched the calculations dance across his face. His eyes flickered to my tail again. “I always thought a mermaid’s tail would be the colour of the ocean. Blue, green, aqua, something like that.”

“They are,” I whispered shyly. “Normally, anyway.”

He paused as he gazed at my tail. “What do you mean?”

I sighed as I was about to launch into the explanation I had given since I could talk. “I’m the only mermaid with a black tail. My family has navy-coloured tails, and most others have emerald-coloured tails. No one knows why mine is black. The physician looked at me, and we even had the sea witch analyze me. Nothing brought up any answers.”

“I’m sorry… did you say sea witch?” Elias leaned in with wide eyes.

And so, before I could stop myself, I poured out the whole story. I told him all about my palace life, my yearning for the land, and my longing to know humans.

By the time I finished, we had been there for an hour, and he was staring at me with such astonishment, I barely knew where to look.

“So, you spending time with me… Is it just human fascination?”

“No!” How could he think that? “No, not at all. I enjoyed being around you. I wanted Tove to help me experience that out there, not from in here.”

“Tove being the sea witch?”

“Yes. She helped me get here. She gave me a potion. The only thing is at midnight, my tail returns for three hours. Which is why…” I stared behind me just as he did.

“Are you going to drag me under and drown me like the legends say?”

My head swung back to look at him, my mouth open in shock. I didn’t know whether to feel hurt or not, but maybe I had it coming.

“I only ask because this might be the only chance I get to swim with a real mermaid.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was my turn for my eyes to widen. Without another word, Elias inched closer to the water. He leaned down to unfasten his boots.

"Your clothes will get wet," I pointed out.

"They already are."

It took me a moment to realize he was right—likely from my unruly splashing about. "Sorry." I smiled apologetically. "Water makes ocean creatures get carried away."

"Clearly," he commented dryly.

Within seconds, he was easing himself into the cold water. A gasp escaped as the temperature hit, and he looked at me swimming next to him. Soon, all that was left out of the water was his head and the top of his shoulders.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"It's c-cold," he stammered between chattering teeth. "How do you handle this?"

"My blood is cooler. Haven't you noticed I always wear summer dresses? Even when it rains?"

Elias grumbled, "I thought you were just showcasing your features."

It was the first time I had been able to truly laugh all night. The tension and fear of the last week gave way to such a constant state of laughter that I could barely contain myself. Before I knew it, he was laughing right along with me.

When the laughter finally faded, he looked at me and a glint of mischief lit up his face. "Want to race?" he asked before taking off under the water.

Race a human? There was no way I could decline, especially since he had already started.

I dove under once more, relishing in the feeling of water washing over my skin and running along my body. I could see him ahead, kicking

his legs and moving his arms in a strange motion. I had never seen a human swim before, and it mesmerized me—likely as much as I had mesmerized him.

It took me seconds to overtake him, and I reached our destination in mere minutes. I looked around at the cave we had entered multiple times—him from land and myself from the water. This was where he had wanted me to come sit with him that first time, that first day when my longing to walk had really begun.

I was lost in my thoughts when Elias finally pulled up next to me. “You cheated!” he sputtered.

I blinked and all I could manage was, “What? How?”

He lifted a hand and pointed underneath the water. “With that!” My tail moved between us in a swishing motion.

“I’d hardly call that cheating,” I scoffed. “I was born with it.”

“A likely excuse,” he stated with a laugh. He swam closer to me, and I braced myself for his close inspection. Swimming with a mermaid was hardly the norm.

My tail brushed his legs, and he startled for a moment. I swam away from him, spewing apologies. I was fooling myself; there was no way this could ever work. He couldn’t even stand the feel of my rubbery tail.

In a movement that startled me, he grabbed my arms and planted a kiss on my lips. We floated together, staring at each other, before he chuckled.

“What?” I whispered.

He flashed a smile. “Now I can truly say I’ve kissed a mermaid.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

We hid in the cave for the next few hours, laying on our backs and looking up at the rocks that made up the caverns.

“Hold on,” he said as he disappeared behind a large rock to fetch the satchel we had long since forgotten about.

Before long, Elias was wrapped in a large blanket and I was snacking on a handful of dried apples. My tail was draped over the rocks, feeling a new warmth outside of the water.

“I love these dried fruits. We don’t have dried anything where I’m from,” I noted.

“What? Really? Why n—” He looked at me as I burst into laughter.

After so much time, I felt like I could finally be myself around him, with no more secrets between us. His acceptance of my story had enabled me to actually share with him, and the open honesty was a relief. What really surprised me was that he had accepted me without any explanation. He didn’t need to know where I was from, what had happened, or why I had come. He knew me; he knew the depth of who I was, and that was frighteningly beautiful.

“Do you want to see the picture I drew?” he suddenly offered, as I was lost in thought.

I rolled my eyes. “I cannot believe out of all the things you could have done, you chose to draw a picture.”

“It’s my first mermaid sighting!” he protested. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Anything other than that.” I smirked. “But very well. Show me.”

He moved to reach into his satchel and pulled out the sketchpad. As he turned the pages, I saw every picture he drew. A winter storm over the ocean. A seagull flying over the ocean. A sunset over the ocean.

“Wow, you’re really into the ocean.”

He paused for a moment before turning to me. “Destiny.” He shrugged.

My heart thumped at his response, but deeper down, there was an alarm bell ringing. *Destiny? Or magic?* I couldn’t tell which was more at play here.

My thoughts came to a halt as he finally stopped turning pages. There I was. The nighttime sky was shaded in, except for the glow of the moon. The ocean waves were moving closer to the very rocks we were laying on, with my dress floating around my tail. And my tail… Oh, it was stunning. The drops of water he had added coming off had a certain glow to them somehow, despite it only being a sketch.

“Wow,” I breathed.

It was his turn to smirk as he confidently said, “I know.”

Suddenly, the familiar feeling washed over me. I felt my body tighten as I held my breath. Concern dotted Elias’ face as his mouth moved, but words couldn’t be heard. The roaring sound of the ocean filled my ears as the pain hit. My tail split in two as searing agony moved along what became two legs once more.

When silence finally came and the pain had faded, I started to breathe again and laid my body back to rest. It was an exhausting process that was unlikely to remedy itself, but in a few minutes, I would feel like myself again, and that was all that mattered.

“Sage?”

I turned my head toward the faraway voice and gave Elias what I hoped was a strong smile. “I’m alright.”

The expression he gave me was one of pure alarm. “Is this… Is this normal?”

“Well… no. Normal would be staying in one form and never changing.” My attempt at inserting humor didn’t go over well.

“I mean, do you go through this every night?” There was no mistaking the concern in his voice.

“Yes.” There was no way of making it sound beautiful. He had seen me transform from a human into a mermaid and back again.

“I can’t believe you would do that. That you would choose this.” He looked out over the ocean through the small cave opening. “You’ve gone through this every night, just to be a human.”

“It’s been worth it, you know,” I whispered. “Every minute, every moment.”

I felt his hand grasp mine as we laid there together. We didn’t need to speak… he knew exactly what I meant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The crashing sounds I heard from the throne room didn't sound good from my place outside the cracked door where I was spying. Elias had escorted me to my room, and I had remained there for all of one minute before sneaking back out and following him to his meeting with the king and queen.

I knew what he was doing. It was no secret to me that he was seeking their permission to ask for my hand. We didn't know how this would work or how long I would remain in this strange mix of human and mermaid form. All we knew was we couldn't deny what was between us. We had to make this work.

The curiosity that filled me was too strong to be denied, so here I stood in this large empty hall, the guards giving me a strange look.

I couldn't make out what words were being exchanged, but the general gist was clear. The king was frustrated and made his disapproval known, and the queen was being her calming, assuring self, and neither gave much promise.

It didn't surprise me that there would be disapproval. After all, in a matter of one week, I had wandered in, inserted myself into their royal life, and made myself at home.

Suddenly, the king's voice roared above all else. "For all the seven kingdoms, my boy, have you forgotten? You are already engaged!"

My heart dropped. Surely, I misheard. There was a misunderstanding or perhaps something was lost in translation. Perhaps it meant something different here. I had heard someone say they were engaged in a conversation, but humans said odd things.

I didn't know what to do as the voices once again hushed. I was nearly falling through the crack in the door with how earnestly I was trying to listen. I had to figure out what they were saying. I just had to.

“You have been promised to Princess Ana of Andalia for over ten years, and I will not break my word on that!” A large clang echoed throughout the hall, and I knew the rage on the king’s face would be enough to break anything he touched.

“Milas, darling. Please, calm yourself.” Queen Astrid’s voice rose to an octave I hadn’t heard before. “Both of you; calm yourselves before I smack you up the heads.” It seemed our gentle queen had a temper of her own, and she was intent on reining both father and son in.

My eyes squeezed shut as I begged the tears to stay at bay. Maybe he didn’t know… Confusion was beginning to make my head ache as I stepped away from the door. I didn’t need to hear more. I could make my way back to my room and pretend I hadn’t heard a thing. Elias would explain later. He had to have an explanation for all this.

“Father, you yourself said we haven’t yet laid eyes on her, and my twenty-fifth birthday is nearing in a few years. How can we hold out for someone we haven’t even met? How can I put my life on hold for this?”

I couldn’t explain the shock that reverberated through my entire body. He knew. He had known this whole time. He had been promised to another, yet, through all of this, he had led me on. Led me to believe we had a future.

The door flew open and, much to my surprise, I was face to face with Elias. He held a thunderous expression, which gave way to a heart-wrenching look when he saw me standing before him.

There was no way I could deal with an explanation now, so I did all I could do at that moment. I turned and ran. He reached out to grab me, but all he caught was the shawl I had wrapped around. With little choice, I released it and disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“How could you not tell me you’re engaged?” I screamed through the door as he called out to me from the other side. “How could you conveniently leave that out?” I struggled in my dress, still damp from the nighttime swim we had enjoyed mere hours earlier.

“I didn’t think it was necessary information… I didn’t think it was relevant,” he countered.

“Not necessary? Not relevant? You’re getting married in three years, and you didn’t think it was important to tell me?” The anger coursing through me was heating my cold veins, and I knew my face was more flushed than any human could fathom.

“Please. Open the door,” he begged as I continued to pace and throw things around the room.

“Not until you tell me why you kept this to yourself.”

“There was never a good time.”

“Yes, because we were only together every day. And I had already told you everything.”

“Because you had to. That’s why you told me your secret, because you had to. Much like I’m telling you right now, because I have to. Face it, neither of us were honest.”

I threw open the door. “And tell me, earlier today, when you had the opportunity to share after I had bared my soul to you, did you return the favor? Did you open up to me about your engagement?”

His mouth moved open and shut. Clearly, I was right. He couldn’t deny that.

“You had every opportunity, yet you didn’t take it. You can hardly blame me for being angry.” I snatched my black shawl from his hands and wrapped it around myself.

My feet were bare as I shoved past him and made my way toward the main room of the palace. Why were these palaces so large? I would have been out of here by now if this whole place was in the ocean and I was swimming. An ache hit me, and I couldn't hide the pain I felt.

This was too much to handle. I had been human for all of one week, and already, it was a disaster. I should have never left the ocean; I should have never come here. Tove was right… humans wrought destruction, and they didn't care who they left in their wake.

"Sage, please. I can explain everything if you just stop and listen." He was running to keep up with me, but my anger was fueling me too much to pause.

"I can't be in here. Too many rooms, not enough ocean," I called to him over my shoulder. "You're welcome to follow me, but I may very well choose not to speak to you."

There was a flurry around us as the guards realized we were leaving the palace grounds. They rushed behind the prince as he followed me.

"Can't we just have one minute alone!" he gritted out around us.

Apparently not.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The ocean was a welcome sight after the claustrophobic experience I had just endured. There was simply no way I could stay here, yet there was no way for me to force myself to change back. I was a human, and that was that. No amount of wishing or distress would change that. I had only one option.

I stepped into the water as waves lapped at my toes like an excited dog. The sea foam created bubbles around my feet, reminding me to breathe through it all, the same way I breathed in the salt of the ocean around me.

"Sage…" I glanced over my shoulder when I heard Elias' voice behind me and saw the stricken look on his face. "Please…"

"Tell me, then. Tell me what you think I should know." I waited.

He struggled to speak, and I knew he couldn't find the words to say what needed to be said between us. "I was young, and I couldn't outright disagree with the matter. In fact, I hadn't even realized I could want things outside of those suffocating walls." He broke eye contact and looked out over the ocean. "The calls of the ocean were getting stronger, and I was confused."

"You got engaged because you were confused?"

"No," he said sharply, then quickly apologized. "It's what's expected in my position. One day I'll rule this land as king, and there is a long line of traditions to follow."

I held my breath as I bit back the retort on my lips. Humans were so cruel to their kind. Trading them like a deck of cards, not caring about their desires. He was the sort to try to carry on this tradition with his own. How could I not see that?

"You didn't mention any of this during the entire time we've spent together. You sought my hand, knowing all of this. You toyed with me." Tears threatened to fall as I faced him. *Let him see them.*

“I didn’t intend to toy with you, Sage. I promise you, I didn’t.”

I turned as I continued to step into the ocean. “Your promises mean nothing to me now.”

“Come inside. Please… You won’t turn until tonight.”

The realization hit once more that I was trapped here. I had traded one prison for another, and there was no escape from that. Who even knew if I could change again permanently? My body had settled too well into this new life, though it was a life I no longer wanted.

I walked deeper into the water as the waves grew stronger around me. A storm was brewing, and I knew nature was sympathizing with me—she always had, and she always would. I didn’t care if Elias saw.

Let him see me in all that I am.

As she swirled around me, I moved deeper, past my waist, my chest, and stopping only at my shoulders. I held my breath as I moved my face into the water, beckoning someone to me under the waves.

It had scarcely been a moment before a fishy face appeared, and I leaned forward to caress it. Lowering my voice under the waves, I whispered a message to be delivered. I then sent my messenger off with a delicate kiss to its rubbery head.

Lifting my head out of the water, with my lungs gasping for air, my heart stilled, and the ocean came to a stop around me. I turned to begin my walk back to the shore, and the water began to move once more.

The look on Elias’ face when I finally met his gaze was one I would never forget. When I finally reached him, his voice was a mere whisper as he watched the ocean synchronize with me. “Who are you?”

His guards stood along the barrier wall behind us, their backs turned in our direction. There was no risk of being overheard, and they had seen nothing.

“Oh, Elias…” I leaned in toward him, a biting edge to my voice, “I’m your worst nightmare.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I spent the day on the beach, pacing, watching, waiting. Elias had given me a wide berth after my display with the ocean. It was pebbles compared to what I could really do, but I'd let that sink in for a moment. As long as it afforded me privacy, what did I care?

His explanation had been more reasonable than I had expected. Although that didn't erase the pain of him never telling me, never sharing. He could have said something. Not just in the week we had been together, but the whole month prior when we had been meeting in that cave along the ocean. He had so many opportunities to speak, and he didn't take even one.

I cast another glare behind me, and even from the distance between us, I could see him swallow hard. He had been watching the sea as though waiting for another storm to form at my behest. I knew he couldn't make out what had happened. Perhaps, even now, he was trying to justify what happened. A strange wind, a passing flurry, anything. *Let him wonder.*

"Maybe we should eat something?" he finally called out to me. "We've been here for hours, Sage."

No more moments were wasted convincing me to return with him. No, he would rather watch me pace and wait with me for whatever would come. It seemed no matter what I revealed or what I did, he was determined to stay close.

I had to give him points in that regard. No matter what I had told him, he stayed. A mermaid? He had drawn a picture. The ocean raging in response to my feelings? He had merely stood and watched.

Yet, the moment I had learned about him, I had fled. I sighed in frustration. My heart was softening toward him too much. While my mind presented a good argument in his favor, I couldn't ignore the result of his discretion.

"You're welcome to eat," I yelled at him. "I've lost my appetite."

I startled as a hand fell softly on my arm, turning me to face him. I hadn't heard him approach, having been so wrapped up in my thoughts.

"Sage, listen to me. Y-you know I care about you," he stuttered for a moment. "I know this isn't the right time to tell you…"

"Then don't."

"I love you." The words came fast, but they were strong and assured. "I love you," he repeated, "with all that I am."

Before I could control myself, my hand raised to cup his cheek. "And I, you," was all I could whisper. "But you are engaged, and I am what I am."

"No!" he said sharply, his passion-filled eyes boring into mine. His hand moved, covering mine. "You have wiped all sound reason from my mind. It's like I'm in a world that is just ours, and you are at its center. How else can I explain it to you?"

I shook my head, the pleading words ready on my lips.

"None of this was a lie," he whispered. "All we've shared together, all we've felt… it was real. I couldn't bear it if you went away not knowing that. I couldn't even bear…" his voice cracked, "if you went away."

"I'm sorry, Elias, but our paths were never meant to cross. We challenged destiny, and now we're paying the price." I stepped away from him and my hand fell to my side. "This is how it was always meant to be." Turning away from him, I approached the water. There was nothing else left for me to do. My face was damp, and I no longer knew if it was from the ocean sprays or the tears streaming down my cheeks.

My family had always been right; Tove had always been right. It was safer in the ocean. Safer where the water could wash away your sorrows and bring a fresh current along with it.

The ocean began to fuss and grow restless as the waves grew stronger and more persistent, and I knew what that meant. I watched as foam and water burst around me, bursting around one lone figure.

"You called, darling?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

There was no ignoring the bright red glow of Tove's hair or her vivid green tail. Her voice was filled with sarcasm, but the expression she gave showed something I couldn't interpret. I rushed toward her and threw my arms around her. I couldn't stop the tears from filling my vision as I felt her embrace.

As I pulled away, her hands moved to my shoulders, and she held me in place before her. "There is something I must tell you." She gave me a hard look.

"Oh, not now!" I cried, scanning her face with the relief I felt. I didn't realize how badly I missed a familiar face until this moment. How badly I missed her face. "Take me home, Tove. Change me back. Please," I begged her with everything in me.

"Listen to me." She cast a nervous glance behind her. I had never seen her so unsure of herself, so uncertain.

"Just tell me later," I hastily responded. "Change me back. You have to."

A desperate look fell on her face as the waves rose behind her. She wasn't alone. Behind her, with a face filled with a thunderous rage that could cause ships to seek the bottom of the ocean, was my father.

"Sage," his angry voice called out, "move away from her."

I glanced between them in confusion but was suddenly thrust behind Tove. "She'll stay with me," she snapped.

What was going on? Had I missed something in my absence? I knew my father didn't care for Tove—and perhaps he even knew she was behind my new human legs—but surely there was no cause for such hostility between them.

"You'll hand her over to me now, Tove, you conniving sea witch. I should have known something like this would happen with you in her life," my father spat out.

"Father," I whispered. "What on earth…" I knew he would be angry, but his words were filled with more than just anger. There was a hatred there so deep, I couldn't even begin to understand it.

His voice softened as he repeated my name. "All these years, I've only tried to protect you."

I felt so much confusion as I pushed away from Tove and struggled to move backward away from them. Neither met my gaze as their eyes remained locked with one another.

"You never needed the potion I gave you to change… you could change at will." She threw over her shoulder, her voice edged with spite. Was that spite directed at me or at my father? I couldn't tell.

"I… I don't understand."

"The potion I gave you was fake. It never worked. I thought perhaps you didn't take it. When the messenger you sent came with news from the shore, I knew… I knew who you were." She spun to face me with a look so icy, it froze me in place.

"No, no… It couldn't have been fake. It worked. Look at me." I gestured to my legs with shaking hands. "See? It worked."

"You never needed it!" she roared.

"But the change that happens every night… The way I couldn't speak to him about it…?"

"That was all in your head. Now I know exactly who you are."

The words she repeated suddenly sunk in. "Wait… you've always known who I am, Tove."

A harsh grip wrapped around my arm, with my legs still rooted to where they were in the sand. "You haven't figured it out yet, have you, you stupid, stupid girl."

I reeled back in shock as the words left her mouth with a bitter edge. Why was she speaking to me this way? What was going on?

“Sage!” my father bellowed out once more.

An overwhelming desire to run came over me, but I didn’t know where I could run to. I felt trapped with Elias behind me and this awkward confrontation in front of me. Nobody was making any sense.

The ocean began to swirl around us as my father disappeared beneath the surface. Waves formed in the distance and rushed in our direction. A panicked look struck Tove’s face as her eyes glazed over from fear of what was to come.

Clouds as black as night began to take shape, and there was no denying they were answering the summons of my confusion.

Suddenly, my legs gave out from under me, and I was swept under the churning water. My lungs immediately burned from the short notice I’d been given to breathe before being surrounded by darkness.

I begged to be pushed to the surface, and the current obeyed as I struggled to find oxygen. I surfaced in a completely different area, with my father next to me. It was him; he had taken advantage of Tove’s distracted panic to grab my legs and pull me in.

“You must calm down, Sage. The seas are becoming unruly.” He looked deep into my eyes, and I saw the urgency. I fought to control my emotions and, suddenly realizing that I was no longer with her, Tove turned toward us.

“Hand her over, August. You know very well who she belongs to,” she yelled over the crashing waves.

“She stays with me.”

“With you,” she spat out once more. “You know who she is; you’ve known all along. It’s why you never wanted her near me, isn’t it?”

“Father, what’s going on? What is she talking about?” I was shaking from my head to my toes as her words sunk in. What did everyone seem to know that I didn’t?

“He’s not your father, girl… and you’re not who I thought you were.” The burning hatred in her eyes filled me with such a sense of dread. She had to be wrong. Of course, he was my father.

“That’s not true.” I shook my head before looking at the man floating next to me. “Tell her, Father. Tell her she’s crazy.”

His eyes were laced with sorrow when he finally met my gaze. The same eyes I had grown up looking into, the king I had always loved and

respected. It felt like a lifetime before words finally left his lips and fell over me.

“I-I cannot.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

The world around me began to swim. My vision made doubles, no, triples of everything. I could feel beads of sweat grace my forehead as though this moment was merely bringing on a post-speed swim frenzy.

“You must.” My strained voice finally broke out. “Tell her, Father. Tell her!” My voice rose as I couldn’t control the sudden screams that escaped. “Stop lying!”

There were tears on my father’s face—a sight I hadn’t seen before, given this was my first time seeing him above the surface. “I’m so sorry, Sage.” A hand leaned to reach me but dropped just short of touching my cheek. “There was never a good time… You were safe with us.”

“Safe,” I whispered. “Safe? From what? From whom?”

“From me, darling,” was Tove’s snarky response. “Or had you not pieced that together yet?”

“Tove, stop,” my father, or rather… the king, commanded.

“Oh no, shouldn’t we tell our little darling who she really is? *What* she really is?”

“Keep quiet, sea witch!”

Tove’s mouth snapped shut as she scowled at the intimidating man who stood before her.

The back and forth between them created tensions in my mind I couldn’t control. A large wave shoved me out of place, and I fought to catch my balance. Father grabbed my arm to steady me before I suddenly felt my legs solidify.

I was changing.

Here and now.

No magic potion, and the sun was showing faintly through the black clouds. It wasn’t midnight. How was I changing? This wasn’t possible. I turned to call out to Elias, but I lost my chance as I found myself surrounded by water, breathing in the familiar scent of the sea.

Had the potion worn off? Was I permanently a mermaid? Tove had said the potion had been fake, but with no explanation, I couldn’t understand what was going on. All I knew was I had a tail, and I could hear the voices above me.

I pushed through the surface and looked around to take in what I could. Elias sat on the beach, out of earshot, watching what I’m sure appeared to be a minor squabble. Except, of course, for the dark foreboding clouds that filled the horizon and the ocean growing fiercer by the minute.

Could I summon him and his guards with the storm?

There was no more time to think as I turned toward the man I had called my father and the woman I had called my friend. They were shouting and as my ears cleared, I finally understood what was happening.

“You’re harboring one of *them*, August.”

“One of what, Tove?” I called out, at last feeling strong enough to confront whatever stories she was telling about me.

“You were meant to stay with me. I took you, and you were supposed to be mine. I used magic to turn you into a fish. You kept disappearing, and I never realized why until I saw it with my own eyes. You changed… into

me. A mermaid with a green tail like mine. I just didn't recognize it because of your tail colours."

"I'm… I'm a shapeshifter?" I asked in awe.

"No. We don't know what you are exactly as your magic extends beyond shifting. You control the very seas we swim in. You're a danger to us all." At that, she lunged toward me.

"No!" the king screamed in a fit of rage, blocking her attempt with his strong arm. "Not a danger, Tove. My child! My daughter. I found her. I took her in."

"She's a danger who must be destroyed, August." She leveled a gaze at me and raised her hands. "And now that I've finally confirmed it for myself, it's time to say goodbye to this world, human."

"Wait!" I cried. "Surely, I deserve to know why. Please." My father glanced at me in surprise as I pleaded with him to follow my lead. I had to know her reasons. "Can't we just wait a moment? Can't we calm down and just talk?"

"There is no reasoning with a sea witch, Sage. She's too far gone."

"Not at all, my dear. I love to toy with my prey before I dispose of them. What do you wish to know?" In one smooth motion, she went as though to sit on the waves with her tail bobbing up and down with their movement.

"Who am I? Where am I from?"

"No, Sage," my father said, sorrow filling his voice once more. "You're my daughter. Do not ask us to say more than that."

"Oh, shut up, you dull man. Let me speak." Tove cleared her throat before flashing a sarcastic smile in my direction. "You're from the Kingdom of Andalia."

"The Kingdom of Andalia?" I repeated back. "But wait, isn't that…" It all hit me at once. "A human kingdom."

A cruel look came over the sea witch's face. "My, you're bright. That's right."

"But wouldn't that make me…"

"A human?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

If I hadn't been swimming in the ocean with the beach far behind me, I would have sat down much like Tove was sitting, but as it was, I had to fight to keep my balance and remain floating where I was.

"No, I can't be human. Look at me… I'm a mermaid." My denial couldn't stop the truth from sinking into me.

"You're a mermaid because you mirrored one! You mirrored *me*." Her hand waved away my confusion as the waters swirled around us. "Now stop interrupting."

My father floated closer as Tove continued with her tale. He knew what I was doing now, but he also supported me in finally knowing my origins.

"I was in love once. Foolish, like you. I fell for a merman I grew up with—a strong, kind, sincere man. I adored him." A faraway look appeared in Tove's eyes, gentle and sweet, as though she had been transported back to another time. "He promised to marry me and take me away from the endless cycle of fish and water we were constantly surrounded by…" Her voice trailed off, living in her memories.

I cleared my throat, and she cast a sharp look in my direction. "We swam to the shore many times to watch the humans as they existed along the waters, too scared of the horror stories they had heard to venture in."

Sadness suddenly filled her voice. "One night, I stayed back to study. I was studying as an apothecary to help our village. He approached the

shore that night—the one night he couldn't hear my warning voice ringing in his ear. There was a woman he met." She stopped and glared at me. "A human."

"He fell for her," I whispered.

"Not only that. He left me for her." Her eyes turned as black as the stormy skies above. "He tricked me. He had gathered enough ingredients for one change. He told me he had bartered with a traveling trader to receive two vials of shapeshifters' blood—enough for both of us to become human."

She shuddered at the memory. "He told me to just make enough for one, and then he would give me the second vial. He volunteered to be a test for it… to ensure it was able to turn us."

"What happened, then?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"I never laid eyes on him again. Until…"

"Until?" I pushed.

"Destruction began to rain on our cove. Our community was torn to shreds by explosions hitting us in the early hours of the morning. Families were displaced, lives were lost, my own family—" she cut off suddenly, emotions choking her voice.

A few moments of silence followed, as neither my father nor I knew what to say. Thankfully, we didn't need to say anything before she continued.

"It was then I found out, not only was he human and had married this woman, but he had become king. He intended to expand his kingdom into the sea and rule all. He traded me in for a princess and became King of Andalia. And you," her eyes narrowed once more, "*you* were his darling child. The princess he had brought into this world with that… that *human*."

It felt as though the entire earth shook in that moment. Waves rose in height, and I could no longer control the swell of the ocean around us. My emotions came crashing down, and all around us, the waves hit at once. We were swept under the water, and I heard a voice in the distance call my name.

We had been pushed closer to shore as my father and Tove fought to keep balanced after being tossed by the waves.

"You!" Tove called out distastefully. "You are the heart of the sea. The magical child of a merman and a human; the bridge that must be

destroyed to exact my final revenge. The revenge I have planned since I first took you from the shores myself."

I gasped at her blatant disregard for everything good in the world. "You mean to kill me?" I finally managed to ask.

"I mean to dispose of you so I must never think of that wretched man again."

"Sage!" Elias' voice rang in the distance, and with a quick turn of my head, I saw him rush toward us.

I fought to move to him, but my tail hindered me in the shallowness of the water. "Elias, stay where you are."

"Something's not right here," he called back to me.

"Really? What was your first clue!"

Tove's eyes snapped to Elias and a wicked grin took over her face. "Ah, so this is the one you've fallen for. The one you risked everything for. The one I have to thank for revealing your little secret."

"No!" I cried out. "It's someone else. It's his guard," I screamed over my shoulder. "Guard, go!"

Elias stopped in confusion as he took in what was unfolding before him.

"I suppose it's only fitting you should find yourself a prince, given your position." Tove laughed uncontrollably, an evil unhinged laugh.

"Shut up!" I cried out. I couldn't take the overwhelming amount of information coming at me. I couldn't take my father looking at me with sadness, Elias looking at me with confusion and concern, and Tove looking at me with a foreboding expression.

"Enough chatter. Tonight marks the end of Princess Ana of Andalia."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

As my eyes widened and I heard Elias gasp. Tove pulled out a mysterious bottle from inside her dress sleeve and popped the lid open.

“Let the party begin, my serious servants, for when we are complete, I will rule the oceans and you will be nothing more than a sad story in history books.”

In an instant, Tove had been replaced by a large sea monster unlike any we had ever seen.

“Sage!” King August yelled over the waves. “Move to shore. Now!”

I couldn’t listen despite his insistent pleas. Elias’ guards, who had by now noticed the commotion, were rushing toward us, ready to protect Elias. I saw my father brace himself for impact against whatever the sea monster Tove would throw at him.

Heads began to come up in the distance as the sea king’s guards appeared on the horizon. How had they known to come? With a glance at my father, he nodded in confirmation that he had sent for them—I shouldn’t have been surprised; he was a man who was always prepared.

“You must transform, Sage,” his voice rose as he called out once more. “It isn’t safe here. Take the humans back. You must.”

No. No, I couldn’t. No matter what there was between this man and me, he had raised me. He had saved me once before, and there was no way I could allow him to do the same again.

“I’m sorry, Father.” I raised my voice. “Forgive me.”

As quickly as I could, I raised one hand to summon a wave. Elias was thrown toward his guards, and I forced the water to carry them to shore. I knew the impact could be harmful with all their gear, but I had no choice.

With the other hand, I took my father and swept him out to sea with his guards. Let the water hold him there until I faced the sea witch on my own. I could hear his desperate cries as he fought to make his way toward me.

“Sage!” he screamed. “No!”

I closed my eyes for a moment to block out the sound until it faded. Now it was just Tove and me. An old friend, older than I had realized. How

did I spend all this time with her and never realize? How had my own moral compass failed me?

"I see you've gotten rid of your supporters. In a hopeless bid to protect them, I'm sure," the creature observed.

"Why are you doing this?" I demanded. "I'm not him, you know. I'm not my father."

"No, you're not," she conceded. "But as long as I know you're out there, as long as you exist, you will haunt me. I'll see him in you for every moment that you live. And so, you cannot live."

I danced around her on the waves as she spun in circles. I was trying to find a weak spot, trying to note if there was anywhere I could reach her without her realizing. There had to be a plan in my head.

In a moment, it came to me, and I barreled toward her as the storm continued to rage. The bottle was still in her hand, and before she could register what I was doing, I had taken it from her. A few drops remained from her transformation, and I struggled to gather them to one corner of the square canteen. I had no idea if this would work, and I knew combining two forms of magic could be dangerous, but I had to attempt it.

"You can't do this!" I begged her in one final attempt to talk her down.

"I must." There was no hesitation in her voice, no remorse, just years of anger and bitterness dripping from her words.

I tipped the bottle over my hand before whispering to myself, hoping this would work, trying to give myself a semblance of courage. With the liquid formed in a ball in my palm, I moved.

Allowing a few drops to enter my skin, I felt my body change. As the magic washed over me, I felt the searing pain pulse through my veins. This agony was unlike any I had ever experienced before; it was as though it went against everything that was natural and true. I knew I had no choice using another being's magic for my own.

Within moments, I was face to face with Tove. Her leering gaze had transformed to shock as she took in the person—no, the creature—before her. A mirror of her own self challenging her.

"Shall we battle?" I asked in much the same tone she had used with me.

She lunged at me with a cry of rage, and I knew her composure was down. I had a mere second to act. I wrapped a slimy tentacle, still holding the remaining magic, around her own, and in a moment, I forced myself to transform.

As fear moved through my mind about how I could make this happen after never forcing myself into it alone before, I felt the pressure hit my ears. A new kind of change. My body was shrinking and pulling something along with it.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was underwater, face to face with a small fish, who's eyes showed it was none other than a furious Tove. Shoving myself away from her, I did what I could to transform back into a mermaid.

Only to find… I could not.

Water filled my lungs, and I felt the weight of the ocean around me. I could no longer see Tove as my human eyes couldn't adjust to the dark.

It was not a mermaid I became in that moment; I was human once more. It seemed the pull Elias had on me was stronger than I realized, as all I thought about was him when I had shoved away from Tove.

I thrashed in the ocean and beckoned the waves to come to me, but I was so weak, I wasn't sure they could make their way to me. I opened my mouth to call out, but there was so much water, it only made my lungs burn even more.

Would I really drown? How was that possible if I was a shapeshifter? This newfound fact about myself still had so many flaws to be explored, and I had so little control.

Strong arms surrounded me, and I felt my body lift out of the water. Opening my eyes, I saw who had saved me.

The same man who had saved me so long ago.

"Father?" I croaked up at him.

"I'm here, Sage. I will always be here."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It took a few moments for me to find my bearings before I was finally able to stand. My father was unable to release me as I looked up at him, and I knew the feeling all too well.

"Tove?" I managed.

"Thanks to you, we have her."

Relief filled my body as I sagged against him. It had worked. I had done it. She would be taken care of, and hopefully, would never threaten us again.

One more name filled my mind, but I couldn't say it. I glanced at the beach and saw him standing there, pacing. Even from the distance, I could see sand plastered in his hair, his clothes covered in mud. Apparently, my ocean summoning wasn't a neat process.

"I know there is so much we need to discuss, but…" Father's voice became choked with emotion as his gaze found where mine had been just moments earlier. "Should you need me, I will be here."

I stared at him in confusion.

"Go to him." And in a moment, Father was gone. It was just me standing there with the legs I had started with, wondering if I could find the strength to make it to the beach and face him. Wondering if I could answer all the questions he had.

As I took my first step, I noted how the sea had calmed, with scarcely a movement in the now-gentle waters. Elias watched as I walked toward him. There was something so vulnerable about his eyes following my approach.

Everything around us was calm before I finally reached him. I wasn't sure what I could do in this moment. The truth was out, and I knew he had heard it all—the chaos, the wildness, the frightening reality of it all.

There were no words I could say to him. The edge of the water was a line I didn't want to cross, but how could I leave this chasm between us?

"I couldn't even bear if you went away." His last words to me before the fighting had started.

There was no ocean I could swim in where I would be far enough away from him. Every current, every tide, would bring me back to him. There would never be a night where I wouldn't remember when we first met, when we first held each other.

I was no longer this strange mix between ocean and land. With him, I just existed wholly as myself. There was no way I could fight that.

The distance between us closed as he met me in the water, sea foam and mist surrounding his ankles as each step brought him closer.

"I know you heard it all," I managed. "You must have so many questions." I could feel tears run down my cheeks. "Knowing me has always been one disaster after another. I wouldn't blame you if you ran. I wouldn't…"

He was silent as he gazed into my eyes.

"I'm so sorry," I sputtered. "I didn't know. I had no idea who I was. I was so upset about you being engaged and now… Well, it's been me all along." I couldn't help the laugh that escaped. The irony wasn't lost on me. "I'm so sorry."

He raised a finger to my lips, and the words I had planned died. The look in his eyes continued to confuse me, and I didn't know what to say.

"Sage. Don't you see?"

See what? The war that had just broken out? The truth of who I was? The reality of our lives shifting?

"This was destiny. The engagement, the ocean calling me, your gifts… It was all exactly the way it was meant to be. No matter where we went in our lives, we were always meant to end up where we are right now."

My mouth fell open as his hand dropped to his side. There was truth in his words. It didn't matter that I was the lost princess of a kingdom, or

that I had been raised in a palace in the sea, or even that I was somehow halfway in between two different worlds.

None of that mattered to him; all that mattered was that I was here, standing before him.

“But you know I can’t stay… You know—” I blubbered emotionally.

“And why not? What’s stopping you?”

I had a million words enter my mind, but in that moment, they suddenly stilled as I realized there was nothing stopping me. There was nothing standing between us except my unwillingness to accept the opportunity that presented itself.

The opportunity for a life of love with none other than the man standing before me.

Taking a step toward him, all I heard was the sound of waves crashing around us. I knew there were people surrounding us. I was sure his family had, by now, joined the crowd on the beach. I knew my family had surfaced behind me. Yet, all I could see was him.

“Elias,” I whispered, feeling my walls finally crumble.

He needed no other encouragement than that, as his arms wrapped around me and pulled me to him. When his lips met mine, I knew what I was always trying to describe, the feeling that hit whenever he was near me.

I’m home.

EPILOGUE

“You know I’m still a mermaid, right?”

It was a late summer night as we lay on the beach together. There were guards around us, yet we felt like we were the only two in the world as I nestled closer in his arms.

He stood, pulling me with him. “We’ll put in a pool of fresh ocean water.” With his hands on my waist, he lifted me into the air and spun me in a circle. “We’ll build you an ocean habitat.” Then he gently placed me on the ground. “We’ll bring the ocean to you.”

I would have melted right then and there if it hadn’t been for the sound logic reverberating in my mind. “So, you’re okay waking up next to a rubbery tail sometimes or seeing me disappear into the ocean whenever I please?”

He pecked a kiss on my nose. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You’d probably prefer a non-magical being who would just stay human,” I snarked.

“Are you trying to get out of our agreement?” he asked in a mocking voice.

“Oh, I would never!” I looked into his smiling eyes. “I’m merely being realistic.”

“My cool, collected, serene mermaid,” he whispered. “Tonight, join me on the land. Dream with me before we say goodnight and go our separate ways.” His hand fell into mine.

I sighed with contentment, my nerves finally calming. “Only this once.”

The moon moved in the sky as we appreciated the silence of the night. The sounds of nature surrounded us—crashing waves, lone seagulls, and the soft whistling of the wind.

When we finally had our fill, I softly said, “It’s time.”

We slowly walked to the water, and he released my hand as I took my steps into the ocean, my body disappearing beneath the waves as the change

took over.

“See you in a couple of hours, my love,” he called out.

In a moment, I was gone.

~

It was the cool morning air that hit me when I finally surfaced with my family around me. Father and Mother. Kai and Flora. Naja. Even Prina had come. They were all here. I swam closer to the beach and felt the waves move with me.

Then I saw him.

Elias was wearing a white shirt and simple brown pants. His feet were bare, and his hair was tousled by the wind. His eyes scanned the water as though to search for me.

Behind him stood King Milas and Queen Astrid while others dotted the shore, but my eyes were solely focused on him.

He spotted me and began his descent into the water. As I neared him, where the water reached his waist, we stopped and stayed before each other, hands clasped.

A man waded in behind him and joined us, and my father and mother stood behind me. Tears dotted my mother’s face, and I could see my father struggle to keep his emotions in check. This man had taken me as his own so many years ago was now giving me away today.

Elias looked down at my dress. The soft pink shells lined the bodice while the gems of the ocean glittered in pearl-like buttons down my front and lace trailed the cut-off sleeves.

“Ethereal,” he whispered to me in an awe-filled voice.

I grinned. “Sage, actually.”

And so, there, on the sandy shore, we were married. Both kingdoms joined together in unity as two spirits became one.

In fin, in hand, until death.

A mermaid and a prince.

END

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Scarlett Luna Strange

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